



more than
DESIRE
YOU

REED FAMILY RECKONING: BASTARDS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHAYLA BLACK

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Steamy. Emotional. Forever.

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MORE THAN DESIRE YOU

Reed Family Reckoning: Friends, Book 8

Written by Shayla Black

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PRAISE FOR *MORE THAN WANT YOU*

“Amazing! Everything I didn’t even know I needed or wanted in a romance novel. Hot. Spicy. Addicting.” - Rachel Van Dyken, #1 New York Times Bestselling Author

“Sexy, passionate and oh-so-clever! An intriguing love story!” - Lauren Blakely, #1 New York Times Bestselling Author

“You’ll hate him and then you’ll love him! A sexy read with a surprising twist.” - Carly Phillips, New York Times Bestselling Author

PRAISE FOR *MORE THAN NEED YOU*

5 Stars! “I adore Shayla Black! She masterfully delivers story after story full of passion, love, heartbreak, and redemption.” - Chasing Away Reality

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5 Stars! “I nibbled my nails to nubs one minute and had to turn up the A/C the next. I enjoyed the hell out of every step of

their journey and was sad to turn the final page. I wasn't ready for the goodness to end...sigh." – iScream Books Blog

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5 Stars! "Ooooooooooh...dirty, dirty, dirty, but also filled with lots of heart." Kay Daniels Romance

5 Stars! "More than Dare You...was every bit of a sexy, can't-put-this-book-down page-turner I wanted it to be." – Reading in the Red Room

PRAISE FOR MORE THAN HATE YOU

5 Stars! "Top-notch characters, a storyline filled with twists and turns, more steam than a sauna, and an ending that tugs on the heartstrings. Perfect in every single way. This is another book in the Reed Family Reckoning series that should not be missed." – The Overflowing Bookcase

5 Stars! "One of my top 5 of the year. I couldn't put this book down. This crazy, intense, sexy book will keep you on your toes and the pages turning from start to finish." – Goodreads Reviewer

5 Stars! "A brilliant read. Loved it." – Goodreads Reviewer

5 Stars! "More than Hate You is an enticing mix of spicy romance and irresistible heartache. Black grabs readers by the heartstrings and seduces her way into their soul." – Goodreads Reviewer

FOREWORD

There are infinite ways to tell someone you love them. Some of the most powerful don't require words at all. This was the truth rolling through my head when I first conceived of this series, writing about a love so complete that mere letters strung together to make sentences weren't an adequate communicator of those feelings. Music is one of my go-to choices.

I *love* music. I'm always immersed in it and spend hours a day with my earbuds plugged in. I write to music. I think to music. I even sleep to music. I was thrilled to incorporate songs into the story I felt were meaningful to the journey. I think of it this way: a movie has a soundtrack. Why shouldn't a book?

So I created one.

Some of the songs I've selected will be familiar. Some are old. Some are newer. Some popular. Some obscure. They all just fit (in my opinion) and came straight from the heart. I listened to many of these songs as I wrote the book.

For maximum understanding (and feels), I recommend becoming familiar with these songs and either playing them or rolling them around in your head as you read. Due to copyright laws, I can't use exact lyrics, but I tried to give you

the gist of those most meaningful to the story. I've also made it simple for you to give them a listen by creating a Spotify playlist. [Click here](#) for all the enjoyment.

BROWN-EYED GIRL - Van Morrison

HAWAIIAN PARADISE - Al Caiola and His Orchestra

CRAZY LITTLE THING CALLED LOVE - Queen

BREATHE YOU IN - Samantha James

HEAD UNDER WATER by Bless You and Lost Boy

LOOKING FOR YOUR LOVE by DallasK

GET LUCKY - Daft Punk feat. Pharrell Williams and Nile Rogers

ROAR - Katy Perry

I COULD NOT ASK FOR MORE – Edwin McCain

ABOUT *MORE THAN DESIRE YOU*

I seduced her for revenge...but I won't let up until she's mine.

I'm Xavian Costa—financial master, maverick, and manwhore. Since my dad ran out before I was born and my best friend slept with the woman I intended to marry, I don't get close to people. But Parker, who poached my ex, is now a bestselling author with a movie deal, and he's modeled his villain after me to ruin my reputation. I want revenge.

Then his innocent little sister, all grown up, traipses into my office. To save her burgeoning business, she needs a fake fiancé. Since she's the sexiest brunette I've ever seen, I'm happy to help—for a price.

We begin our whirlwind “engagement,” and I get to know Corinne, not as the gawky teenager I remember, but as a beautiful woman.. She's sweet, sassy, and smart as hell. I admire her kindness. I relate to her ambition. And I love the way she moans when I take her to bed. Soon, I'm falling and questioning my plans to use her to destroy Parker. But when our sham blows up in my face, I'll have to prove to Corinne that I feel more than desire for her until she says yes for real.

chapter ONE

Thursday, Late August

Maui

Xavian

I figured I would be notorious someday...but I didn't count on it happening like this.

My phone buzzes for about the hundredth time in the last ten minutes. I glance at the screen. "Son of a bitch."

Again, I silence the device. Still nothing but paparazzi, press, and professional gossipmongers wanting me to comment about my former "friend's" monster bestseller *Pushed Too Far*. So they can twist my words to fit their BS narrative? Fuck that.

It's a goddamn Thursday, and the Dow is ending the session by taking a dump. Since I'm a broker who helps manage a few billion dollars of other people's money, I expected at least a few panicked calls from investors. This morning has been too silent. It's a bad sign. I've gritted my teeth so much, it's a wonder my molars aren't dust.

Across the breakfast table, the oldest of my half siblings, Maxon Reed, cocks his head. "Damn, X. You weren't kidding. The shit over this book really has blown up."

"Right in my face," I grouse, stabbing a potato with my fork. "It was bad enough when that fictionalized 'tell-all' piece of trash released and shot to the top of the bestseller lists." It sat there, packed full of lies, for months. Unfortunately, it's back again because the movie is dropping.

Tomorrow.

"I remember the speculation. Everyone wanted to know the true identity of the nefarious Xayden Coast character."

I snort. It wasn't too hard for internet sleuths to prowl through author Parker Emerson's past to come up with my name and spread it. After all, Xavian Costa is ridiculously close. Media outlets picked up on it and speculated about me some more. Parker has stopped just shy of confirming my identity in interviews. He knows I'd sue the shit out of him. But it hasn't mattered. Readers everywhere believe my former pal's supposed poor-little-rich-boy account of his college years, despite the fact it's only half the story.

"Parker didn't do much to hide my name. Since the studio changed the release date of the movie to take advantage of the summer season and they've launched a big PR campaign, the public's curiosity has intensified again."

"You've never defended yourself. Why not tell your side of the story?" my second-oldest half brother, Griffin Reed, suggests.

"No one cares about the truth." That would make the media's golden boy look like the backstabbing sack of shit he is. It's easier to pile onto the self-made suit, especially since I'm the bastard son of the infamous Ponzi-scheme swindler Barclay Reed. I never met the man. But since that inconvenient truth refutes their salacious tale, it will be left out.

Griff sighs. "Good point. Unfortunately, it will get worse before it gets better."

I've already figured that out. This morning's gossip rags sported such ridiculous headlines as SHOCKING DIARY ENTRY REVEALS PARKER EMERSON BARELY SURVIVED FINANCIAL THUG and EMERSON'S BULLISH TORMENTOR SLAMMED AS SAVAGE.

"Are you sure you want to partner up with me? It's obviously a fucking inopportune time..." As much as I want to be in business with the two brothers I discovered a couple of years ago and admire the hell out of, I have to give them an out. For the last few years, their thriving real estate business here on the islands has been expanding all over the Pacific Rim. Sure, we'll be able to really grow clients' investment

portfolios *and* property fortunes if we team up, but this bullshit can't jeopardize my brothers' reputations.

Maxon and Griff exchange a quick glance, then nod.

"Of course we're sure," Maxon says. "With the promotional push leading up to the movie's release getting so much attention, you're going to be a hot topic for a while. But it *will* blow over."

Before I'm a senior citizen? I'm not convinced. In the time it took Maxon to answer me just now, my phone buzzed twice more. "I appreciate that. But if it makes you more comfortable, we can postpone the launch...or cancel the deal altogether."

"No." Griff shakes his head. "Investors should only care about your talent and integrity as a money manager, and you've got a more-than-proven track record."

Will that be enough when I'm being portrayed as a devious, lying bully in the court of public opinion?

"What do Bethany and Clint say?" Maxon asks.

"Same as you two. So far, they're ignoring the negative press." And I'm grateful.

My half sister and her husband originally hired me into their once-fledgling brokerage and are now letting me buy in as full partner *and* lead this property-based expansion because the three of us have been beyond successful, beating the market by double digits each year. Our client list has ballooned, as have the assets we invest for them.

On the personal side, they've been rocks—just like all the Reed clan. As families go, they're everything I wanted growing up the only child of an overworked single mom.

Early in life, I spent a lot of time alone, so I learned to be self-reliant and independent. I resented it as a kid. As an adult, it's a big contributor to my success. While losing my mother when I was barely nineteen made me feel even more fucking alone, friends got me through. Most were great. And learning shortly after college graduation that I had an actual family, thanks to a sperm donor who couldn't keep his pants zipped, was stunning but welcome news.

“That’s good.” Maxon sips his coffee and sends me another considering stare. “I think I speak for all of us when I say we’re family and we won’t turn our backs on you, professionally or personally.” He winces. “Look, my wife would murder me for asking, because we know you’re not the asshole Emerson portrayed, but it would be helpful to know what really happened.”

“It would,” Griff agrees. “By the way, I’m not shocked Keeley said that. Britta said the same thing.”

Maxon laughs. “Despite being different, our wives are almost always on the same page.”

Griff nods. “So true.”

Maxon smiles, then turns to me. “X, I don’t want to trample on your privacy—”

“You’re not. I don’t mind sharing.” In fact, I wonder why they didn’t ask sooner. I have no problem explaining this shit show. “I met Parker as a college freshman. I was popular in the dorm, mostly because I’d made friends with a local drunk who would buy me booze. Parker rubbed people the wrong way. He was a social outsider.”

“Because he’s an East Coast guy?” Maxon asks.

“Or because he’s an asshole?” Griff wants to know.

“Both. But I was failing lit, and he needed help in calculus, so we exchanged tutoring. He didn’t seem like a bad guy once I got to know him. He could be funny, but there was a side to him...opinionated and kind of pompous, you know? No one could argue with him. His debate style was always *I’m right. You’re full of crap. End of discussion.* It came off as condescending. Since I enjoy verbal sparring, I let him roll off my back a lot. But a lot of my buddies thought he was an insufferable know-it-all and refused to hang with him.”

“Like Hayes?” Griff asks about my best friend of at least a decade.

“Yeah.”

“I liked your pal Elliott the minute I met him.” Maxon grins.

“Everyone does. Anyway, after my mom died, I struggled a lot. I almost dropped out of school. I had a hard time keeping my shit together. Parker was really there for me. I spent that Christmas at his place because he didn’t want me to be alone. His whole family welcomed me.” I laugh. “I think his little sister even had a crush on me.”

Maxon frowns. “Did he give you a hard time about it? Is that why he started all this mudslinging? He didn’t mention her in his book...”

“No. I mean, he’s an overprotective big brother, so he wasn’t thrilled. But he knew I wasn’t interested. Corinne was just a kid, maybe fourteen.” I shrug. “If I’d actually touched her, I could understand that fucking book he wrote. But I didn’t. He blames me for his social snub, his depression, and his suicidal thoughts, despite the fact he fucked me over first—all because of a woman. He conveniently leaves that fact out of his book.”

“Seriously?” My oldest brother rolls his eyes.

Griff shakes his head. “Isn’t it always about a woman?”

“Hey, at least she was honest. Parker is still bullshitting everyone, playing the victim, like he played no role in everything that happened to him.”

“When your name first got floated as the inspiration for Xayden, I read the book,” Maxon admits. “But that character is a heartless bastard. I mean, you can be a prick when it comes to business, but you’re never a spiteful prick.”

I silence my phone again. “The rest of the world doesn’t share your sentiment, but thanks. We’ve only been family for a few years—”

“Forget that,” Griff insists. “It’s not about how long we’ve been family. It’s the fact we are. We’re in your corner.”

And I feel one-hundred-percent blessed because of it.

“There’s got to be a way to get the truth out there,” Maxon says. “What if this woman corroborated your version of events?”

I shake my head. “Impossible.”

“Because?”

“Long story.”

Griff sits back in his chair. “Isn’t that convenient for Parker? He can craft whatever story he wants, and there’s no one but you to call him a liar.”

My buddy Hayes, along with my other true friends—Graham, Echo, Kella, and Maryam—all know the truth, but... “No one who matters to the press, no.”

“That sucks. The bright side is that paparazzi don’t live in Maui, so they aren’t camped out at your door.”

“That’s about the only bright side of this mess. But when your phone is constantly blowing up—” Right on cue, it does again.

Maxon looks angry on my behalf. “What are you going to do? Are you sure you don’t want to get the truth out?”

It’s pointless. No one wants the story where Parker is the bad guy. They just want the lurid, gossipy tale of my unforgivable backstab and his supposed descent into mental hell. “Fuck that. I’m going to get even. I’m going scorched earth.”

And he’ll never see it coming.



When I make it to my office, I’m still annoyed. I finally turned off my damn phone. Since my voice mail is full, tabloid gossips can’t leave messages anymore. That’s a plus. But neither can anyone else, like a client. It blows.

I’m so fed up.

Cursing, I settle behind my sleek black desk and check the world financial indices, jotting down ideas to better shield clients from loss. Thankfully, Bethany and I already saw most of the current economic mess coming months ago and mitigated the damage. Her husband, Clint, nearly finished earning his degree online while studying for his CFP, is getting the hang of reading the financial tea leaves and responding quickly. But with Bethany breastfeeding baby number two and our client list still swelling, I'm really damn busy.

"Mr. Costa?" My forty-something assistant, Lisa, peeks her head in my door. "I've got messages for you."

I scan the fistful of slips in her hand and frown. I have calls to return every morning, but not this many. "Throw away any from news outlets or internet gossip sites."

"Okay." She filters through the papers in her hand, then tosses all but two. "Someone named Jacinda asked for a return call as soon as possible. She said to say she's, um...still at the Four Seasons until Sunday."

A tourist I met in a bar. Everything we had to say, we communicated naked in her suite last Friday night. "Trash."

As I sip my coffee, Lisa reads the next message. "Someone named Maxie rang. She must have confused you with her doctor, because she said to tell you she needs vitamin D."

I nearly spit out my brew. Lisa's glance is somewhere between confused and concerned. Apparently she has no idea that Saturday night's casual fuck asked me for more dick. Thank God. "Trash."

She pushes her glasses up her nose and sends me a slightly censoring stare. "I know it's none of my business—"

"Then don't say it." Since we've had this discussion before, I know the lecture she's about to give me. I could recite it.

"I have to. I care about you," she huffs. "If you ever want to be happy, you have to open yourself up to someone special."

"But you're taken, Lisa." I flash her a grin.

She tsks. “I meant someone single, closer to your age. You have to trust your heart and believe in love. Look at all your brothers and sisters...”

Every one of them is blissfully attached to their spouse and spitting out kids faster than I can blink. Maxon and Keeley now have two daughters with a third on the way. Griff and Britta seem to be a boy-breeding factory since they recently had their fourth. My other sister, Harlow, and her husband, quarterback legend Noah Weston, are seemingly trying to breed their own football team since they just had baby boy number three. My other wrong-side-of-the-blanket brother, Evan Cook, and his wife, Nia, have a boy and a girl, both frighteningly smart and precocious as hell. Bethany and Clint just had their second. I’m the lone bachelor standing and I like it that way, despite Lisa’s well-intended nagging.

“I see most of them every day.” I ignore the rest of her speech by scanning the Dow again since it closed moments ago in New York. I wouldn’t call today’s trading a blood bath...but close.

“Then you know how happy they are.”

“I do.” Sadly, the Hang Seng futures don’t make a rebound tomorrow seem likely. Not that I expected one, given inflation. “But there’s more than one way to be happy.”

“True, but you shouldn’t be alone.” Lisa sighs. “It’s time you realize that not everyone is out to hurt you.”

“Not everyone, no.” Just most. Parker is a prime example.

“If you give people a chance, they’ll learn to love you, not simply what you can do for them.”

That’s true of my family, my good friends, and Lisa. Everyone else...I’m skeptical. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

I click over to my favorite financial guru’s blog and start scanning her take on today’s negative trading. The damn housing market looks like shit again. Interest rates aren’t helping.

“You’re not listening.” Lisa sounds upset.

I sigh. She means well, and I need to stop being rude. “I hear you, and I appreciate your concern.” With my track record, I don’t see myself ever getting hitched. “But I love work, I’m married to my job, and I’m happy with the status quo.” I grin. “Unless you’re ready to divorce Dan...”

She rolls her eyes at my teasing. “Why would I marry a man barely older than my son? I’m not even sure men under thirty are house trained.”

“I am. Mostly.” I wink.

With an exasperated shake of her head, she turns for the door. Then she seems to remember something and whirls back. “Oh, your ten thirty, Mr. and Mrs. Hanson, canceled the call this morning. Family emergency. They rescheduled for tomorrow. I’ve already sent you their client intake forms, so —”

“I’ve read them and prepared a list of recommendations, but I’ll save it for then. Anything else?”

In the last three years, Lisa has become both my right and left hands. I can barely function professionally without her. But since my morning meeting is no longer coming, I should use that time to vet some overseas investment opportunities. I’ll probably start crafting a killer revenge plan to get back at Parker instead.

No time like the present.

“I booked a new appointment into that slot. She just happened to call moments after the Hansons. She’s coming in person.”

Unusual. Frowning, I launch the calendar on my laptop. “C. Rose? Who the hell is that?”

Lisa shrugs. “I thought you might know.”

“Not a clue. Client intake forms?”

“I sent them, but she warned that she wasn’t at her computer, so she wouldn’t get them completed before the meeting.”

Which is in less than fifteen minutes. Damn it, I don't like to go into a consultation cold, and Ms. Rose obviously hasn't been screened. "Is she qualified?"

We don't touch clients with less than ten million to invest.

"N-not entirely. But she swore she would bring documentation with her."

Unacceptable. "Lisa..."

She lets out an exasperated sigh. "All right. Fine. She sounded adorable. Young and energetic, smart and—"

"We don't judge our clients, simply help them grow their wealth."

"And, as I was saying before you interrupted, perky. She seemed very interested in you, too."

"Perky isn't a quality I enjoy in women." I gravitate to a more sophisticated woman who likes documentaries, the outdoors, and sucking cock. "This is an investment brokerage, not a dating service."

"Maybe in this instance it could be both?" She sounds hopeful.

Since Lisa is only trying to help, I don't snap. "Sure. I can see the headline now: *Beastly Broker Bangs Bodacious Client in Scandalous Seduction.*"

"You don't look all that beastly," says an unfamiliar feminine voice that somehow sounds girlish and polished at once. "And I don't know about banging since I've come here with a proposal, not a proposition. But maybe you weren't talking about me, since I'm not that bodacious?"

I jerk my head up as Lisa winces and moves aside. In the doorway stands a brunette with wide dark eyes, long lashes, and a bee-stung mouth. She's wearing a wraparound dress that clings to the curves of her breasts and reveals a hint of cleavage before banding around her tiny waist and hugging her lush hips. The silky fabric, in a shade of pink only slightly more sedate than Barbie, ends halfway down her alluring

thighs. White heels with straps that wrap seductively around her ankles add a few inches to her below-average height.

If this woman is claiming she's not gorgeous as hell, she's a liar. She also looks barely old enough to drink. Innocence clings to her.

Idly, I wonder how fast I can corrupt her.

Then I pray like fuck this sex bomb isn't my ten thirty.

I stand. "Can I help you, Ms...."

"I-I'm, um...C. Rose," she stutters. "I have an appointment."

Damn it.

Lisa shoots me a clandestine smile that's as smug as it is elated, because she knows this woman is my type. "Come in. Can I get you coffee? Water?"

"No, thank you."

Even Ms. Rose's voice does something to me, especially reinforce how hot I am to do her.

"Xavian Costa." I step around my desk and approach, hand outstretched. The gesture is professional, but I'm mostly itching to touch her. "You said something about a proposal?"

"Yes."

The closer I get, the more familiar she seems. I stop in my tracks. "Have we met?"

She takes my hand with a noncommittal smile. A sizzle jolts up my arm.

Holy shit. Did she have the same reaction?

She looks startled, then quickly jerks her hand from mine, like I've burned her. "Thank you for meeting with me."

So she feels it, too.

"I'll leave you now. Let me know if you need anything." Lisa hustles to the door and closes it behind her.

Now I'm alone with a woman who likely lacks the funds to invest. Rather than escorting her out, like I should, I'm hoping I can persuade her to lose her clothes and spread her legs for me.

Instead, I clear my throat and gesture to the chair in front of my desk. "Have a seat, please."

She nods and grips the pale clutch in her hand like she's nervous, then crosses the room, her heels a soft click on my bamboo floors. The scent of her perfume wafts past me like a tease, something tantalizing I can't put my finger on. Something I've never smelled until her.

As we both take our seats, my heart revs. Through thick lashes, she lifts her gaze. Our eyes meet again. The zing of awareness nearly knocks me back.

Jesus, I've been attracted to women before, but this pull is insane. Still, she's supposedly here for business.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Rose?"

With a nervous curl of her hair behind her ear, she swallows. "I wanted to talk to you in person. Like I said, I have a proposal. I think we can help each other."

To scratch an itch? I'm all for that. But the determination on her soft face tells me her pitch has nothing to do with sex. "You're not here to invest."

"No."

"You led my assistant to believe you were." There's a chiding note to my tone.

She's unapologetic. "Would you have seen me if I hadn't?"

If I'd known how beautiful she was, yes. But that's not what she's asking. "Probably not. I'm a busy man."

"I know. I'll make this as quick as possible." She sets her clutch on the edge of the desk, then takes a deep breath and lifts her chin. "I'm Corinne Emerson, Parker's sister."

Her admission is like a slap. No wonder she looked familiar. I see it now, though her face is less round and her

curves more filled out. She grew from a cute kid into a drop-dead gorgeous woman. And Parker knows my weaknesses... *Goddamn it.*

I stand. “Get out.”

As I march toward the door, she grabs my arm, her grip desperate. “Please. Just listen. Three minutes. If you still want me to leave then, I will.”

“Since your brother sent you to spy on me, everything you’re going to say is a lie. His ploy doesn’t surprise me, but it’s low—even for him—to dangle his eminently fuckable sister in my face. You should think twice about letting him use you as bait.” I pull free from her hold and yank open the door to my office. “Go. We don’t have anything to say.”

“We do if you want revenge.”

I shouldn’t be taken in by her BS or her pretty face, but that grabs my attention. “Explain.”

She side-eyes the yawning portal. “Shut the door and I will.”

I’ll probably regret this, but she said the magic word—*revenge*. Slowly, I comply. Of course I know Parker sent her to befuddle me with lust, gain my trust, and find out what I’m up to so he can devise new ways to bury me in the press. Or find fodder for his next book. Either way, I’m not falling for his bullshit. But I will take advantage of Corinne’s visit. If I keep her talking, she might divulge something useful, something I can use to destroy her brother once and for all.

Slowly, I shut the door and return to my seat. “Three minutes. If you don’t answer every one of my questions wholly and truthfully—”

“I will.”

Casting her a skeptical glance, I set a timer on my phone. “The clock is ticking. Let’s pretend you’re not lying to me.”

“I’m not.”

I scowl. “Why would you come to help me, of all people, get revenge against your brother?”

“It’s a valid question...with a long explanation.”

Is she trying to buy more time to lure me in? “Make it short.”

She lets out a breath. “I run my own business. I started it in college as a fun way to make ends meet. Three weeks ago, everything changed and I’m in a financial bind. I need assistance now.” She pauses. “Or a fiancé.”

For ten silent seconds, I simply stare. What she said doesn’t make sense, probably by design. I’m reluctant to get drawn into her sob story since I’m already too interested in the rest of her, but... “All right. I’ll bite. Your brother won’t help you with an investment or a loan?”

Corinne shakes her head. “He’s the roadblock, and he’ll kill four years of my work if I can’t find a way around him.”

Her problem isn’t mine. It’s likely all bullshit anyway... but what if it’s not? What if her quandary really does give me the opportunity for sweet revenge against Parker? Since he can’t stand being thwarted, he would absolutely hate it if I helped her with whatever business issue he’s blocking.

But even if I don’t, I could still win. Corinne and I share a mutual attraction. If we spent a filthy fuckfest of a weekend in my bed, my nemesis would absolutely despise that.

That possibility alone makes her spiel worth listening to.

“Tell me more.” I kill the timer on my phone.

“Thank you.” She sounds as if she genuinely means that.

I’m not convinced she would willingly traipse into my office to backstab her one-and-only brother. Corinne used to worship him. Then again, she was a kid. It’s possible she grew up, realized what a self-serving shitbag Parker is, and decided to take action so he can no longer hold her back.

“I’ve always wanted to make jewelry,” she continues. “It’s something my mom and I enjoyed doing together when I was a kid. After she and my dad died, I kept doing it. I got good at it.”

Since I have a vague recollection of her making a necklace for a friend the Christmas we met, I simply nod. “Go on.”

“When I started college, my tuition, room, and books were paid for, thanks to an educational fund my parents started for me, but I needed money for food and expenses.”

“Parker had money.” He inherited a fortune from his late grandparents our junior year of college. The party we had in Vegas that spring break with a tiny fraction of it was sick.

“I didn’t want his. I still don’t. Too many strings. And he’s always been big on me earning my own way so I could learn the value of a dollar and all that. That’s fine with me.”

Something Parker himself never had to do. “And?”

“I fell back on making jewelry. It was better than waiting tables until two a.m.” She shrugs. “So, as a freshman, I started an online store, selling my handcrafted jewelry.”

“Makes sense.” I’m impatient to get to the point. “What does this have to do with me?”

“During the last four years, my business grew from something that paid for a few extra bowls of ramen each week to something that afforded me a nice little living. Nothing extravagant, but I could keep a roof over my head and have an occasional splurge, especially once I homed in on hand-beading bands for smart watches.”

Like the unusual one she’s wearing? “Where’s the problem? Did business drop off?”

She shakes her head. “The opposite, actually. Three weeks ago, one of the *Real Housewives*, with millions of Instagram followers, made a completely unsponsored video, raving about the beaded smart watch band she bought from me. Orders blew up, and since then I’ve sold what I normally would in a year.”

“That sounds like a good problem to have.”

“Yes...and no. I make everything myself in a corner of the lone bedroom in my seven-hundred-square-foot apartment in LA. I need a bigger space. I need some new tools. I need to

hire staff to pack and ship all this stuff, handle customer service calls, and make me an occasional sandwich. I can't do everything on my own anymore."

That sounds like a genuine problem, but... "Your brother still won't help you?"

She shakes her head. "He told me to get a 'real job.'"

Of course he did, while he's living in a fucking McMansion in Malibu putting the shit he makes up in his head down on paper. The asshole. "If you're working full-time and making a living, you have one."

"Exactly." She throws her hands in the air. "He keeps insisting I could be hired by a Fortune Ten company since I have a business degree with an emphasis in entrepreneurship. He conveniently forgets that I was a double major and I also have a BA in fashion design. But according to him, that isn't worth the paper it was printed on. The thing is, I don't want another job."

And he shouldn't push her to get one. Unfortunately, Parker is always convinced he's the smartest person in the room, and his ego won't tolerate an opinion to the contrary. "Sounds like he hasn't changed."

She presses her lips into a flat line. "He hasn't."

I'm stupidly tempted to reach across my desk and caress her soft cheek in reassurance. I don't. I'm still not convinced her visit isn't merely a tactic to catch me off guard. "I understand the reasons you're looking for financial help."

"Without too many strings."

That counts me out—at least under normal circumstances. I'm meticulous when it comes to managing clients' money; even more so when it's my own. But I get that she's not looking for another Parker in her business. "What good would a fiancé do you? Well, unless he's rich himself..."

"I don't want a handout from anyone. But a fiancé would help with my grandparents' trust."

“They left you money, too.” Of course they did. So why isn’t she using that?

“A lot of it. Enough that I could be one of your clients if I could get my hands on it. But Parker—”

“Holds the purse strings, and he won’t give it to you?”

“You know my brother well,” she returns acidly. “The way the trust is put together, I get all the funds without requiring anyone’s approval or any other stipulations at twenty-five. But that’s three years away. If I don’t get help now, my business will be long dead by then.”

She’s right. When lightning strikes with a product, especially anything trendy, every minute counts. But something niggles at me. “Parker inherited all of his at twenty-one, no strings. Not you?”

“No. My grandparents were old-fashioned. They were convinced I wouldn’t know how to manage that kind of wealth until I was older. Or had a man’s ‘steadying influence.’” She rolls her eyes. “So I could have the money today...if I got married.”

The picture is clear now. If she’s telling the truth—big if—she must be horrifically pissed off at Parker. I would be.

Then again, Parker is a master at weaving a woe-is-me tale. He probably crafted this one and spoon-fed it to his accomplice—a.k.a. his oh-so-bangable little sister—to finish bringing me down.

So I feel compelled to poke holes in her story. “How will a fiancé help you if your grandparents’ trust stipulates that you have to be married to get your money before you turn twenty-five?”

“Well, technically, Parker is the trustee, so he could decide to give me my inheritance now. Of course, he refused.” And she doesn’t merely look pissed, but hurt, too. “He might change his mind, though, if giving me the money was the difference between me burying myself in my work and marrying you.”

chapter TWO

“So where did you leave things?” Maxon asks that evening over the sounds of a crying baby in the background.

Must be close to his daughters’ bedtime. “With Parker’s sister? I told her I’d think about her proposal.”

But I’m not interested in becoming an investor, especially not now. My capital is tied up in buying my partnership in Bethany and Clint’s brokerage and expanding my business into real estate with Maxon and Griff. Becoming Corinne’s fake fiancé, though? That intrigues me...for a lot of reasons.

“For how long?”

“Forty-eight hours. She’s only staying on the island for a long weekend.”

But her visit raises a host of questions. If she’s sunk every dime she’s got into her business, who paid for her trip? And if she needs to be making product to keep up with the insane demand, why is she waiting even two minutes to get back to her desk?

All the answers seemingly lead back to Parker and raise the only truly important question: Why did Corinne come to see me—and not someone else—unless she’s trying to help her brother put the final nail in my coffin?

That’s the most likely scenario...but what if I’m wrong? What if she really can hand me my revenge on a silver platter?

“Do you need that long to think about what you’ll say to her?” my oldest brother asks.

“No. But I need more time to dig into her cover and see how much of it is true.”

Maxon laughs. “You may not have known you’re a Reed your whole life, but you certainly act like one. We’re all born

driven, decisive, cutthroat bastards. It's in our genes."

"That's a fact," his wife, Keeley, shouts in the background.

Maxon laughs. "At least until the right someone reminds us that we have a heart. Isn't that right, sunshine?"

"You better not forget it, mister," she teases. "Do you have time to give Kailani her bath?"

"Sure. Come here." His voice softens when he murmurs to his daughter, laughing at her little-girl sounds. "So you're going to let Corinne sweat for a couple of days. I like it."

"You would," Keeley says with a laugh.

"What, sunshine? The enemy's sister suddenly goes behind her brother's back to help X get revenge? You have to admit, it's pretty convenient."

"Is it, but if she's being truthful, it's also clever. Her brother will never see it coming."

Keeley has an interesting point. I can't deny that if Corinne is smart enough to support herself with her craft, she might be smart enough to scam her scumbag of a sibling.

Since Maxon has his hands full and I'm nearly at my destination, we wrap up the call. Then I pull my sleek, two-seater Audi into a resort I've hooked up in a few times. It's not the Ritz, but it's hardly Motel 6. I give the valet my keys and promise him a healthy tip if he takes good care of my wheels. Then I don my sunglasses, despite the setting sun, shove my hands into the board shorts I threw on to look like a tourist, and stroll inside.

The minute Corinne Emerson left my office, I called in some favors. A client's nephew is a private investigator on the island, and in exchange for a reasonable fee and some investment advice, he quickly learned that Parker's sister is staying here and is scheduled to depart Sunday morning.

So that part of her story checks out. I'm still waiting on the rest.

As if the PI has ESP, my phone rings. "Perfect timing, Owen. Talk to me."

“Either this girl is really slick at covering her tracks...or she’s being straight-up with you. She paid for her plane ticket with her own credit card. Same with her hotel stay. Apparently, she told friends she’d always promised herself a vacation in paradise if her jewelry business ever had a six-figure year. Now it has, at least according to her most recent bank statement, but she’s only staying a few days because unfulfilled orders are piling up. And she has a meeting on Monday morning with a local bank to discuss a small business loan. They’re going to reject her since she has no collateral. Despite having good credit, it will be her third rejection.”

Damn, this guy is fast. I won’t ask how he comes up with this kind of information in a few ticks of the clock. If Corinne is here, asking me to invest, she must expect the bank will turn her down again. “Thanks. Anything else?”

“Her brother seemingly has no idea where she is. Or if he does, the two of them are putting on a hell of a show, because, according to social media, his new girlfriend is trying to set Corinne up with a co-worker and thinks they’ll be double-dating tomorrow night.”

Not conclusive proof that Parker’s pretty sister is telling the truth, but it makes her story seem more legit.

I stop and take in the full-frontal ocean view from the hotel’s lobby. Yeah, that never gets old. Despite three years of living on Maui, I’m still struck dumb every day by how beautiful it is.

“Did you get Corinne’s room number?”

“Hours ago. Just before I called, I sent you an email detailing everything I know so far. I’ll wait while you look, see if there’s anything else you need before we hang up.”

He’s being extra helpful and attentive, probably because he’s hoping I’ll take him on as a client. No can do, but I’ll make sure he’s handsomely rewarded if his information pans out.

Seconds later, I scan my email. Sure enough, Owen sent everything I’ll probably need in order to watch Corinne for the

next forty-eight hours—or until I’m convinced she’s not BSing me on her brother’s behalf. After I commit her room number to memory, I end the call and head for the elevators. Halfway there, I stop dead in my tracks.

She’s perched on the edge of a stool in the bar, wearing a figure-hugging dress that clings to the tops of her thighs and shows off a tongue-swallowing amount of toned legs. The curve of her ass is impossible to miss—and even more impossible not to gawk at. Her dark curls brush the small of her back with her every move and gesture.

Where is she going all dressed up? And who is she going with? I wish I’d fucking asked Owen if she traveled here alone...

Nothing about Corinne gives me a hint. In fact, she looks almost out of place among the other guests who have obviously baked in the sun all day. Despite her sexy dress, she still looks so untouched—either by the rays or a man’s hands.

As she smiles, the bartender says something, likely in an attempt to flirt. She dips her head, tucking her hair behind her ear. I catch a glimpse of her lips, glossy and plump and so kissable. I can’t remember the last time I was this tempted after a mere glance.

I need to focus or I’ll fall for the first BS story she tells me, especially if it comes with sex. According to my brothers, that’s another hallmark of the Reeds. If we aren’t careful, we’ll think with our sex drives first. If there’s fucking involved, our brains come in a distant second.

She sips on some bubbly cocktail and scrolls through her phone. I don’t see her looking around for a significant other or even a guy to spend the night with.

While her attention is diverted by whatever TikTok nonsense she’s probably watching, I slip into a corner of the bar, half hidden behind a potted palm, and sit. It’s the perfect position to watch her.

A waiter comes by. I order a scotch neat. He brings it promptly and asks if I want a menu. Normally, I’d be hungry

for dinner at this hour. But watching Corinne, my stomach takes a back seat to lust.

Around me, other men notice her. The guy two stools down is definitely eye-fucking her. He looks forty if he's a day. Plus, his ring says he's married. She ignores him. There's another guy who's clearly with a big party edging away from his crowd and closer to Corinne. Then the bartender, in between pouring patrons' drinks, walks his stare all over her again.

They make me bristle. I find myself glaring down anyone who looks at her for too long.

Five minutes slide by. She finishes one effervescent drink. Her interaction with the bartender suggests that someone already bought her another. Corinne refuses and pays for it herself. Her brother is an asswipe and they share genes...but I admire her self-reliance.

Fresh drink in hand, she starts suddenly, then reaches for her phone. "Amali? What's up?"

Since I'm sitting ten feet behind her, I can just hear her. If the music or the chatter were any louder, I couldn't. Soon this place will be hopping and hearing myself think will be impossible. But now, it's half-empty.

Corinne hesitates and listens to her caller, nodding. "You said something about a blind date, but you didn't tell me you meant this weekend." She falls quiet again, this time frowning. "Look, I don't have anything against Craig since I've never met him. But I'm not free Saturday night." The woman on the other end must be yelling, because Corinne rears back and jerks the phone from her ear. "I'm not blowing you off. And it's not personal. Maybe another time, but—" Suddenly, she winces, then lets loose a long-suffering sigh. "What do you want, Parker?"

At the sound of my nemesis's name, I lean closer. What is the shit stain after?

"Last time I checked, big brother, I'm over eighteen. I shouldn't have to tell you where I am. The fact I'm answering

the phone means I'm alive and well."

I give her props for standing up to the asshole. Sure, it's possible she's figured out I'm eavesdropping and her rebellion is merely an act. But I don't think so. Since she's dealt with her brother her whole life, she must be aware that Parker is convinced he knows better than everyone and rides roughshod over the people he claims to love. He doesn't care how overbearing his behavior is. He only cares about being right.

She sighs again. "No, I'm not available for a blind date on Saturday night, and that's all I'm going to say. Tell Amali I'm sorry if there was any confusion."

Corinne looks frustrated as she stabs her screen to end the call and shoves her phone in her clutch.

She hung up on her brother? Yes. She flatly ended the call without saying goodbye. Maybe she really is fed up with him...

The overattentive bartender asks her something. She shakes her head. A swing and a miss. Not thirty seconds later, the married man leans closer and tries to strike up a conversation. She turns, glances pointedly at his wedding ring, then shifts away. Another strike. A quick scan of the party guy in the corner tells me he's going to make a play for her next. Corinne stands, drink half-finished, then grabs her purse and makes her way out of the bar before he can strike out, too.

I watch the swish of her long hair and the sway of her gorgeous ass as she heads across the lobby and disappears into the ladies' room.

Party guy looks deflated.

I pay for my scotch and stand, then follow her. I have to admit that, so far, Corinne seems on the up and up. But the closer I am to someone, the better my BS meter works. Besides, slinking in corners isn't how I get things done.

Since I'm here, we might as well have another chat. That has nothing to do with wanting to see her again or craving an eyeful of her in that sexy-as-hell dress.

I lean against a pillar and wait for her to emerge. Across the lobby, an old man ambles around the corner, cane in one hand, room key in the other. He scans the open area with a frown, looking lost. Tourists walk past him like he's invisible. A bellboy approaches, pushing a rolling cart filled with luggage, but when the old man opens his mouth, the bellhop either doesn't notice or doesn't care and trudges by with a grunt. The elderly gentleman, dressed in a Hawaiian shirt, khaki shorts, and sandals with athletic socks, heaves a dejected sigh.

Feeling sorry for him, I shove away from the pillar to help. Before I can reach the old guy, Corinne emerges from the restroom, wearing fresh lipstick with her head held high. Since I'm still twenty feet across the lobby, she's closer. I expect her to waltz past him.

She doesn't.

I'm surprised.

Corinne might be strapped for capital now, but she grew up with a silver spoon in her mouth. I haven't delved much into the investigator's initial report, but I know from Parker that Corinne attended a posh boarding school back East and spent summers with her grandparents in an opulent mansion. When I first met her, she'd already learned to speak four languages and play the piano. She also sang in an award-winning show choir, was on the debate team, and had been chosen for the academic decathlon. In short, she grew up with every advantage.

It was a far cry from my childhood in a studio apartment in the hood with a single mother who worked three jobs just to make sure we had food, clothing, and shelter...most of the time.

Corinne stops in front of the old man and lays a soft hand on his shoulder. "Do you need help, sir? You look lost and... If I'm wrong, just tell me—"

"No, you're not wrong," he says in a voice gravelly with age. "I haven't been this lost since my first trip to Paris back in

the day, when I got off the plane and realized I couldn't read any of the signs."

Her laugh is light, and a smile looks really good on her. "That must have been a while ago."

He grins. "June fourteenth, 1964. I landed at Orly—no Charles DeGaulle yet. The airport was chrome and yellow and seemed so huge. I'd graduated high school in small-town Wisconsin two days prior, and I was dying to see the world, starting with Paris. I had a backpack, a good buddy, a little money, and a travel guide. We spent three months on the Continent making our way from city to city, attraction to attraction, never worrying about getting lost. Now?" He laughs at himself. "My wife went to have a massage, and I can't find my way back to our room. All these elevators look the same, but they don't all go to every floor. My glasses...I think I need a new pair. I'd be grateful if you could help me."

Through his story, her smile widens. "Of course. I would have loved to have seen Paris back then. How amazing!"

"It was something..." His smile says the times were good and the memories fond.

"What's your name, sir?"

"None of this 'sir' business." He shuffles his room key into the fingers curled around his cane, then sticks out his free hand. "Arthur Belmont."

She shakes it like she's genuinely delighted. "Hi, Arthur. I'm Corinne. If you'll tell me your room number, we'll get you to the right elevator. Or do you need help to your door?"

He flushes a little. "I might. Like the elevators, all these hallways look the same."

"They do, but I think your glasses need a good cleaning. Do you mind?" She reaches for them.

"Go ahead." He squints as she removes them, then sets them in his hand.

From her clutch, she takes out the case holding her sunglasses and withdraws a soft cloth, then polishes his lenses

until they're fingerprint free again. Afterward, she settles them back on his face. "Better?"

"Much. It's not foggy here after all." He laughs at himself.

"No. If you'll tell me your room number, we'll get you settled."

Arthur murmurs the information and hands her his key. "Do you know where that is?"

"Since it's not in my tower, I don't. I just got here last night. But we'll figure this out," she promises.

I've heard enough. Since Parker's pretty sister has decided to make assisting Arthur her good deed for the day, I'll have to settle him before we can talk.

I approach the pair. "I can help."

Corinne's head snaps up. Her eyes widen. "What are you doing here?"

She's too smart to be genuinely asking such a naive question, so I merely smile and address the old man. "Hi, Arthur. I'm Xavian, a friend of Corinne's. Let's see if we can find your room, okay?"

As he shakes my hand, he looks between us. "A friend, huh? Last time I had a 'friend' I looked at like she's a delicious cupcake, I married her. That was fifty years ago."

I laugh. He's a nice old guy, and he's clearly relishing the attention. It's not a problem, except I'm here to grill Corinne. But...I'm also not opposed to extra time to gape at her in that figure-hugging dress.

"I'll keep that in mind," I quip, plucking the card key from Corinne's hand. "Follow me."

"Do you know where you're going?" she asks.

"I'm familiar with this hotel."

She looks confused. "Even though you live on the island?"

I merely toss her a smile over my shoulder. "I've spent a few nights here."

When my meaning sinks in, Corinne frowns, then takes Arthur's arm, steadying him while they trail me to the correct bank of elevators. "Are you and your wife here on vacation?"

He answers with pride as he shuffles behind me. "We are. I promised her something special for our fiftieth wedding anniversary. She's always wanted to come to Hawaii. Between working two jobs and raising six kids, we never had time or money for big vacations." He laughs. "Now she says she never wants to go home."

"Maui has that effect on people," I tell him as we enter an open elevator. "What floor?"

Arthur shrugs. "I can tell you what the view from our balcony looks like. I guess I didn't pay attention to how I got there. I've always been a little directionally challenged."

"Tenth floor," Corinne supplies.

I push the button. "Your wife likes it here, obviously. What about you?"

His smile beams. "I've never seen a place so beautiful in my life. Living here must be paradise."

"Most of the time," I say as the car shoots up. "Three years ago, I came here on a business trip for a week. I connected with the people and the island...and I never left."

Corinne turns to me, surprise all over her face. "Really?"

"Really."

I'm guessing Parker told her I'm a calculating asshole—no shock—so my spontaneous decision to move here doesn't jibe with her preconceived notion of me. If we spend any time together at all, I'll inevitably rattle her again.

After a few minutes and a wrong turn, we finally find Arthur's room. When his key card lets him right in, he's visibly relieved. "Thank you. You won't tell my wife that I got lost, will you?"

"Nope," I promise. "We men have to stick together."

“Nothing to tell, actually.” Corinne smiles. “Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“You, too,” he calls. “And not that you asked me, but you two would make beautiful babies.”

She blushes and clears her throat. “That’s very kind, but we really just met.”

Arthur’s smile widens as he turns to face me. “Then you should get to know each other better. Go buy the lady a drink.”

When I first met the old man, I never imagined I’d be taking advice from him, but he’s onto something. “I think I will. Enjoy your evening.”

“After my nap, you betcha. And if you two get married, I expect to be invited.” He winks.

Corinne smiles, then rummages in her purse for a business card. “I’ll be here until Sunday morning. If you get lost, call me.”

He clutches the card, his grin widening. “Will do.” Then he turns to me. “I’m the guy who got the girl’s number. You need to step up your game.”

“Touché, you cheeky bastard.” I give him a jaunty, two-fingered salute as I open the door for Corinne, then file out behind her, leaving Arthur to rest—and me alone with my enemy’s gorgeous sister.

Silently, we walk to the elevator. Well, she’s silent. Admittedly, I’m admiring her ass and wondering what she’d do if I touched her.

She presses the button to summon a car and turns to face me. “Why did you come here?”

“You didn’t really think this morning’s conversation was our last, did you?”

“Unless you wanted to see my detailed business plan, yes.”

I don’t give a shit about that. I’m in no position to invest right now...but she doesn’t need to know that. “I’m still

thinking things over, and I have questions. How about that drink?"

She tries to pretend she's not leery, but her face gives her away. "All right."

We make our way back to the lobby bar, but when the bartender perks up at the sight of her and the party boy in the corner hustles in her direction like he thinks he has a chance, I stake my claim by fitting a hand to the small of her back and giving both men a warning stare. "It's getting crowded and loud. How about we try the restaurant upstairs? It's got a great view of the ocean. I'll buy."

Corinne hesitates like she doesn't trust me—not surprising since everything she knows about me she's heard from Parker—then nods. "Lead the way."

Five minutes later, we're seated at a cozy, linen-draped table for two beside a wrought-iron railing, overlooking a vast expanse of the Pacific. The sun is setting, throwing vibrant pinks, oranges, yellows, and blues above the shimmering water. The sick sunsets are one of the many reasons I love Maui.

A waiter delivers water and takes our drink orders to the backdrop of Van Morrison singing about his "Brown-Eyed Girl." I ask for another scotch. She surprises me by ordering something other than a standard mojito, margarita, sex on the beach, or cosmo.

"A French 75, huh?"

"I like the balance of dry gin and champagne, along with the bubbles." She sounds defensive. "Did you want to talk about my choice of drinks or my business?"

Neither. "I'm not criticizing, just saying that you surprise me."

She relaxes then, and I wonder if Parker jumped her case over something as trivial as her choice of drinks. Knowing him, he's butted in on the way she leads her whole life.

"Are you buttering me up for something?" She raises a brow at me. "Information about my brother, maybe?"

“No.”

“Secrets about the film dropping tomorrow?”

Of course she’s seen it, and under other circumstances I might be interested, but... “No.”

She frowns. “Then what? Sex?”

I lean forward, elbows braced on the table, and stare straight into her dark eyes. “No. But if you’re offering, I wouldn’t turn it down.”

“From what I hear, you never turn it down, so I have no interest in sleeping with you.”

But she shifts nervously in her seat and her pulse jumps at her neck.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Parker said you had one heck of an ego. What I’m offering you is a chance to get revenge against my brother, just not at my expense. I know why you and Parker hate each other —”

“You don’t,” I assure her.

She shoots me a dubious stare. “You’re telling me his book was untrue, despite all his corroborating stories?”

“No. It’s mostly true. He stretched things for effect, but... more or less, it’s accurate.”

“See? You’re exactly what he described, which is why I would never sleep with you.”

“And what’s that?”

“An egotistical manwhore.”

I shrug. “I’m good at the things I enjoy, princess—making money and making women come. Why deny the truth?”

Her jaw drops. “Wow, you’re even more egotistical than I thought.”

“If that’s how you want to see me...”

The waiter saves the conversation when he sets our drinks in front of us. “Would you like to order dinner now?”

Normally, I would because I hate wasting time, but talking to Corinne is the only way I’ll find out if she’s telling the truth or if she’s here to fuck me up on Parker’s behalf. And sometimes, booze is almost as good as truth serum.

“We’d like another few minutes, please.” I smile at the waiter, silently promising him a fat tip if he’ll scam.

“Very good.” He nods and walks away.

Corinne takes a long sip of her cocktail. Her little groan of pleasure is sexy as fuck. The thought of undressing her and making her eke out those satisfied sounds gets a rise from more than my interest. But my cynical heart cautions me to stay on my toes. Even if she’s not here to do Parker’s bidding, she isn’t with me because she’s interested in *me*. She’s only interested in what I can do for her.

A far too fucking familiar situation.

I skim the rim of my scotch with my finger. “You do realize there are two sides to every story?”

“You just admitted that everything my brother said was true.”

“I said mostly. Did he ever tell you *why* I did it?”

That question surprises her. “Other than your incredibly flawed character? He thinks you’re jealous of him.”

I scoff. “And you believe him?”

“He *is* my brother.”

“Who’s never pissed you off? Who’s never been wrong? Who’s never bent the truth for his own purposes?”

She doesn’t respond to that. “If you truly had a reason to make his last year of college a living hell, why has no one ever come forward with that story? Why haven’t you ever explained? Or even defended yourself?”

“Come on... You’re naive if you believe anyone is going to listen to me over the multimillion-dollar budgets of both the

publisher and the movie studio. If I said anything, it would only reinforce that I'm Xayden Coast and give more spotlight for Parker's trash. Besides, the only other person who could corroborate my story is gone."

She downs another sip of her drink and stares at me. Her expression isn't hard to read. She doesn't want to know because she doesn't trust me. And she doesn't want to care about me as anything beyond the guy who can help her get her hands on her fortune. "Okay, you had a reason. It doesn't involve me. I'm just looking for financial help."

"Or a fake fiancé."

She frowns. "I was kidding about that."

Maybe she was. I'll table that...for now. "So you're not curious at all about what made me hate your brother?"

Corinne hesitates, her dark hair spilling over her bare shoulders. "It's not why I'm here."

But she looks intrigued. I'll give her time, lure her in. She'll want the truth. She won't be able to help herself. "Okay. Tell me your business plans and what kind of funding you're looking for."

Her smile is immediate. She thinks she's won. It's cute. In fact, she's adorably ballsy and seemingly naive at once. She's definitely not as jaded as she wants me to believe.

"I need five million dollars to expand, preferably in the next sixty days."

"For machinery?"

She shakes her head, and I can't help but notice the way the last of the day's rays make her face glow. How beautiful would she look with her head on my pillow, her shiny dark tresses spread across my white sheets, and her cheeks pink while I'm fucking her to orgasm?

"No. I hand-bead every piece. I always will. But I've outgrown my apartment, which I rent. I found a nearby house for sale that's perfect. Three bedrooms and a bonus room. I'd use one for myself, and I can take the wall down between the

other two to create one big workspace, like a craft and office area combined. The bonus room I can use for storage. I offer a lot of different styles, plus I do custom pieces. That means I keep a lot of raw materials on hand and they have to be organized.”

She’s clearly thought through things that would make her production easier so she can expand to fit the current slew of orders. Still, I can’t help but play devil’s advocate.

“What kind of partnership are you offering?”

“I’m looking strictly for a loan. I’ll pay you back in no more than three years—with interest.”

“Why me? You can get a loan anywhere. Can’t you?” Let’s see what she says to that.

Corinne nibbles on her lip. “Banks won’t lend me that kind of money. Turns out that a twenty-two-year-old woman with a ‘hobby’ that makes money but has no collateral isn’t considered a good risk in this economic climate.”

“Hmm...” She’s being honest about her loan status, at least. “What if hand-beaded smart watch bands aren’t the rage in a year? In a month? What will you do?”

“Smart watches aren’t going away anytime soon, and every female who hates the industrial drone look—which is a bunch—wants something more interesting. I keep up with trends and fads, so I’m always at the forefront of fashion. And I have more traditional designs for people who want that, plus I’ve expanded to include bands for men that are bolder and more substantial but still functional. And I’m in touch with the celeb who first recommended my product. She’s turned me on to other influencers, many of whom have said they’ll do a plug for me for nominal fees as a favor to her once I’ve geared up. I can’t get cheaper, more effective advertising.”

“Probably not, but I don’t give out loans, princess. I invest.”

“That’s twice you’ve called me that. Don’t.”

Is that silver spoon a touchy subject? “Take the endearment. It’s better than the other names for you rolling

through my head.”

“I’m not even slightly surprised.” Corinne sounds annoyed as she raises her hand to get the waiter’s attention. “Since you seem determined to make every moment we’re together difficult, I’m going to need another drink.”

I smile. She’s playing right into my hands. “Go for it.”

She drains the last of her French 75, then smiles when the waiter rushes off to bring her another. “Back to your question... You don’t have to worry about trends or my business going south, remember? In three years, I’ll come into my inheritance, then I can pay you back. All cash.” She snaps her finger. “You’ll make a profit, and we’ll go our separate ways forever.”

Sure, but I have other ways of making a bigger return that don’t require me to tie up my liquid capital for three years. “You must have other rich friends. Since I’m both your brother’s enemy and an egotistical manwhore, why ask me?”

“Because I thought you’d want revenge enough to say yes.”

“Let’s be honest. That’s not the only reason. You need someone in your life who’s willing and able to stand up to your brother when he pulls his overbearing bullshit. Am I still the only person in pampered Parker’s life who’s never bent under his pressure?”

She flushes a pretty pink, so I’m taking that as a yes. “Despite your flaws, I don’t think you can be bought.”

Not by anybody. But especially him? “Fuck no.”

When the waiter sets her fresh drink down in front of Corinne, she grabs it like a lifeline, swallowing half in two gulps.

“When was the last time you ate?” I ask.

After more of those noises that make my cock press uncomfortably against my zipper, she sets her drink down and rakes her tongue across her lips. It’s an unconscious gesture,

but one that makes me wish we could skip dinner and get naked. “Breakfast.”

Time to get her some food before her stomach rebels. I nod toward her menu. “Decide what you want to eat.”

“You’re bossy. This business arrangement isn’t going to work if you’re questioning me half the time and spending the other half telling me what to do.”

“I’m not your brother. I’m trying to keep you from passing out or throwing up.”

Corinne scowls. “I’m not drunk.”

She’s not...yet. “If you keep drinking like that on an empty stomach, you will be.”

Her scowl deepens. “You might not be my brother, but you’re a lot like him—always thinking you know better. No wonder you were good friends before you became enemies.”

“Let’s get one thing straight: I am *nothing* like your brother. If we go into business, I will never stab you in the back...unless you stab me first.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Why are you here if you don’t?” I shrug. “This place grills some amazing fish, but if you’d rather just drink your meal, fine. I won’t stop you.”

Corinne studies her half-empty glass, then sends me a tart stare. “All right. I’ll order.”

“Good call, princess.”

Her dark eyes narrow on me. “I told you not to call me that.”

“I heard you the first time.”

“But you don’t care. Perfect.”

“I said I wasn’t overbearing like Parker. I didn’t say I’d be easy to deal with. But...since you can’t get the loan you need anywhere else and all of your friends are too afraid of your

brother to stand up to him, it looks like you're stuck with me, *princess.*"

She presses her lips together in a mute white line as the waiter approaches and takes our order. He promises to have the food out quickly. I ask for a bread basket to help soak up some of the alcohol in Corinne's stomach. Thankfully, he hustles back with it, then I butter a piece of steaming sourdough and set it on her plate. "Eat."

She shakes her head. "I'm trying to give up bread."

"It's not Lent, you're already drinking pure sugar, and you're on vacation. Eat the carbs. It's better than puking."

With an irritated side-eye, she bites into the warm, yeasty slice and moans again, this time in a low, melting tone. "Oh, my gosh, that's good."

I shift uncomfortably to get my zipper off my turgid cock. If she knew the filthy thoughts that little whine of hers is making me think, she'd cross herself and hiss at me like I'm the spawn of Satan. "So...if I'm only willing to invest, not loan you funds, how do you see this partnership working?"

"I don't." She finishes the last bite of sourdough, her eyes closing like it's a sexual experience. "I might hire help for some clerical tasks, but I prefer to work alone. And I don't want anyone else responsible for the nuts and bolts of my operation."

"Since you're not willing to negotiate, it sounds like we don't have much to talk about. We should just enjoy the rest of our dinner and go our separate ways."

She slams down the drink she picked up moments ago. "Listen, I don't know what game you're playing, but you didn't come to my hotel and suggest dinner just so you could turn me down."

"And you didn't come all the way to Hawaii to play hardball, especially since your options are limited. Me giving you a loan for three years simply so you can succeed, while nice, isn't a satisfying revenge. You'll have to sweeten the pot."

Corinne hesitates. “What do you want?”

“We’ll get to that.” Once I find the best strategy. But the more I turn this situation over in my head, the more I realize I’m not ready to put all my cards on the table. Still, letting her peek at my hand—while watching her reaction—might tell me how to proceed. “But I don’t know if I can trust you.”

“Me?”

“It’s not personal. You knew I wouldn’t give you my blind trust. After all, there’s a reason you made an appointment to see me under a fake name.”

“C. Rose *is* my name, first initial and middle.”

“Not your whole name and not the name you go by. You knew if you made the appointment as Corinne Emerson that I wouldn’t see you.”

“Maybe so, but I hoped that once you’d talked to me, and I told you what was going on—”

“That I’d magically believe you after you’d just lied to me?” I level a skeptical stare her way. “With very few exceptions, I don’t believe anyone or anything. And before you call me a cynical bastard, you might ask me why.”

She stares down into her melting drink. “You think Parker is to blame.”

“You think he isn’t?” I lean closer; I want her to hear every word of this. “When we started our senior year of college, I’d moved into an apartment with my girlfriend, Hadley. Well, my fiancée by then. I’d scraped together every dime I made for over a year to buy her the prettiest ring I could afford. We got engaged the weekend before school started. Like me, she was there on scholarship, having clawed her way into our esteemed academic institution with nothing but her wits and determination. Parker told me repeatedly that she wasn’t good enough for me. He called her a climber and a gold digger. I wasn’t rich, so his accusation didn’t add up for me. I told myself that he didn’t know her like I did. I even wondered if he just wanted her for himself. He definitely didn’t understand my feelings for her. So I told him to back off and shut up.”

“That’s not how my brother operates. When he’s convinced you’re wrong, he’s relentless and all too happy to show you...” She pales as her eyes go wide. “Oh, my gosh.”

“You’re getting the picture now, aren’t you? I came home early on a Friday night from one of the two jobs I kept to pay for my love nest with Hadley, all while taking a full class load. I found her—”

“Stop. I know what you’re going to say.”

I keep talking. “In our bedroom, on her knees, sucking your brother off. She was still wearing her engagement ring. But Parker left all that shit out of his fucked-up, pity-party book.”

Corinne looks somewhere between shocked and sickened. “I’m sorry.”

Her apology stuns me. “Why? None of that is your fault.”

“I know my brother. If he didn’t like your fiancée and didn’t think you should marry her, he would have felt totally justified in proving it so he could ‘save’ you.”

“Oh, he did. Not that he was wrong. The last thing Hadley said to me was that she appreciated me for giving her a place to live when she couldn’t afford one and I’d helped her study when she needed it, but despite being really fucking sorry, Parker had *actual* money, not merely a bright future. Of course, he dumped her right after she left me...”

“I-I never heard any of this.”

“No one has.”

“And Hadley? You said she’s gone.”

“Dead. Car accident about six months later. She was with some even richer—married—guy whose blood alcohol level was twice the legal limit when he plowed into a tree.”

“If all that’s true, I understand why you want revenge.”

“*If?*” The word is out of my mouth before I realize that I can’t question her honesty without expecting her to question mine.

“He’s still my brother. Even though he’s being an ass about my inheritance and my business, I hate thinking he’s capable of that kind of backstabbing—”

“He is. You said it yourself.”

“But...none of Parker’s classmates the press interviewed mentioned Hadley at all. Nor did they say anything about him betraying you.”

It’s a valid point. “I was too embarrassed to admit to my frat-boy friends and football teammates that she had cheated on me. So I didn’t tell anyone. If someone asked about her, I said we split up because she dropped out of school and moved away. Those weren’t lies; she did drop out and leave LA. It just wasn’t the reason we broke up.”

“So what did you tell all those frat boys and football buddies that motivated them to make my brother’s senior year so hellish that he questioned his existence and contemplated suicide?”

Of course she’s going to lay that accusation on me. “Nothing much. I just led by example. I got ahold of his porn-viewing history and circulated it. Don’t ask.” Just a guess, she probably wouldn’t want to hear how much her brother fantasized about being spanked by women in pleather, killer heels, and attitude. “Then I pantsed him at a party.” Where people snapped tons of pictures of him with a MAMA’S BOY tattoo on his hip and posted them around campus and across the internet. I didn’t know they would go viral. Everyone else thought the whole thing was hysterical because they never really liked him; they tolerated him for me. Well, and he often paid for the beer. “That’s it. All I did was a couple of stupid pranks. Booze and immature idiots did the rest. At the time I wrote it off as karma.”

Instead of dusting himself off, finding his bravado, and pretending he saw humor in their stupid, sophomoric crap, Parker sniveled and cried. They ridiculed him more for it.

“His humiliation wasn’t revenge enough for you?”

I didn't take delight in his torment as much as I thought I would. He ended up shuttering his social media accounts for a few months and lying low. It was a blessing in disguise because I saw my circle of friends for who they were. After that, I reconnected with a bunch of my high school pals, especially Hayes and his now-wife, Echo. The two of them, along with Graham, Maryam, and Kella, are all genuine, kind people. They've stuck with me through thick and thin. Even though I live in Maui now, we're still tight.

Now that I think about it, none of those friends liked Hadley, either. The difference is, they didn't sleep with her to prove their point; they merely supported me when the relationship fell apart.

"If your brother would have left the past in the past, I would have, too. We both got fucked, just in different ways. But you guessed that he modeled Xayden Coast after me. So did the rest of the world, since the paparazzi won't stop calling me for comment. *Pushed Too Far* smears me publicly. It could destroy me professionally."

"I guess it can't be easy when you're in such a high-profile business. Handling other people's money... Clients have to trust you."

"Yes, and I've had to work twice as hard to maintain investor confidence since your brother's book hit the bestseller lists." It also doesn't help that I'm Barclay Reed's bastard offspring. "And with the movie dropping tomorrow, the cycle is starting all over again."

She nods slowly. "So what kind of revenge are you after?"

I'd love to spend a raunchy weekend between Corinne's legs, but even if it's the juiciest possible retribution to let the whole world know I've defiled his little sister, I won't do that to her. I wouldn't wish having her public image wrecked and subjecting her to the kind of hounding by paparazzi and bottom-feeding gossip hounds that I've endured on anyone just for revenge.

"No answer? Are we at an impasse?" She finishes the rest of her drink.

I do the same, gratified when the waiter sets fresh cocktails in front of us almost immediately. “Let me think on it. We’ll find a way for you to get the money you need and the revenge I’m after.”

chapter THREE

Corinne is surprisingly quiet through the rest of dinner. What conversation we have centers around business. She seems especially intent on showing me pictures of her designs, the video the *Real Housewives* star rolled about her custom band, then snaps of her current office and workspace. It's cramped and she's clearly outgrown it.

How does she sit in a dinky office chair with shitty lighting for ten-plus hours a day, seven days a week, and make these watch bands? I work hard, yeah, but I have enough time left over to spend with my siblings and their spouses here in Maui, to talk to my friends in LA. I take vacations. I hang out on the beach. I maintain a daily exercise regimen. I even keep up with a varied reading list, though a good chunk of it is work-related. But still...work-life balance. Corinne seemingly hasn't had any for years. And her motherfucking brother lives perched above Pacific Coast Highway with unobstructed ocean views, having wild parties and rubbing shoulders with Hollywood's elite. His only responsibility is spending a few hours a day giving self-indulgent interviews and plugging away at his next novel, release date still three years in the future.

I barely know Corinne, and I shouldn't waste energy or emotional capital feeling sorry for her, but I don't understand how Parker can let his own sister slave away while he's living the high life. If I didn't already think the asshole needed to be taken down a peg or two, that alone would convince me he needs some comeuppance.

"So what made you decide to move to Maui? Really?" she asks.

After her fourth French 75, her words sound slightly slurred, but I'm relieved she ate half her dinner. At least she has something in her stomach.

"A lot of reasons."

I'm still feeling out whether she's spying for Parker. That theory is looking less likely by the minute. He's done her wrong, too, and I understand wanting to succeed in spite of someone...but I haven't completely written off that possibility.

"Besides the views around here. You don't seem like that type that's in-in"—she sighs in frustration—"impulsive."

Since she's over-enunciating, it's time to cut her off. I also need to make sure she reaches her room safely. There are still too many guys around this resort—employees and tourists alike—who would be happy to take advantage of her.

I motion to the waiter, then murmur instructions in his ear before giving her my attention again. I hate to admit she's an adorable drunk. And she seems like a decent person, too. I have no idea how since she's related to such an asswipe.

"You're right; I'm not usually impulsive. But you know I grew up the only child of a single mom, right?" At her nod, I continue on, making sure she's listening too closely to notice the waiter behind her, swapping her cocktail with fresh water. "A few years back, right around graduation, I was contacted by a private investigator working for a family who suspected that we share a father and wanted me to take a test to verify."

"You really didn't know Barclay Reed was your father?"

She may not believe me; most people don't. "No. My mom never said anything about the asshole whose only contribution to me was half my genes. So I said yes. I was curious. When I got the results, I was here on a business trip. In fact, I accidentally met my sister-in-law that day."

"Accidentally? You weren't stalking?"

"No. I had no idea. My friend Hayes, who was a coworker at the time, was with me. We had a few hours off, and his then-girlfriend, Echo, wanted to visit the bed-and-breakfast where her sister and brother-in-law had recently honeymooned. When we stopped by and started talking, it turned out that the guy who owns and runs the place with his wife is my oldest brother, Maxon." I shrug. "Small world."

“I’d say so.” Automatically, she reaches for her water, frowning after her sip. “What happened to my drink?”

“You finished it a while ago.”

“I didn’t.”

“Don’t you remember?”

The little line between the perfect arches of her brows is almost cute, though the rest of her—cleavage included—is sexy as hell. Once upon a time, I would have sweet-talked her until she let me carry her to bed.

There’s too much at stake for that tonight. It’s tempting... But I have to settle for prying answers from her—at least for now.

She shakes her head. “I don’t. I think you’re trying to pull a fast one.”

“Me? Never. I guess that means you also don’t remember ordering”—I look up to find the waiter coming our way with two dishes of mango tapioca flan, topped with little yellow plumeria and a generous dollop of whipping cream —“dessert.”

Corinne whips around so fast she has to steady herself in her chair. She gapes. “I would never have ordered that. The sugar. The carbs. My drinks are already loaded with them.”

“Okay, maybe I ordered that for you. But give it a try. If you don’t like it, don’t eat it.”

“I’m going to love it.” She sighs with regret. “I’ve never met a carb I haven’t.”

“Why are you worried, princess? You’re gorgeous.”

“Are you trying to seduce me into giving you information about the enemy? Or is that how you get so many women into bed? Liquor them up, butter them up, then sex them up?”

I laugh as the waiter sets down our plates and shoots me a sidelong stare. He probably thinks I’m on a date. He’s likely also wondering how I’ll answer that question. “Not anymore. I’ve refined my methods over the years.”

She reaches for her spoon. “I don’t know if you’re kidding.”

“Coffee?” the waiter asks us.

“Please.” I quit drinking scotch when I realized I needed all my wits for sparring with Corinne.

“I should just drink my water...”

“Aren’t you supposed to be on vacation? Live a little...”

“I’m supposed to be securing a business loan. And I really shouldn’t eat this temptation on a plate, no matter how much it’s calling my name. But in for a penny, in for a pound.” She sighs, then addresses the waiter. “I’ll have coffee, too.”

“I’ll be back with two cups shortly.” Our server disappears.

“Take a bite,” I encourage.

She hesitates. “I’ll demolish the whole thing.”

“I’ll watch.”

Her breath catches. “Why?”

“You moan when you eat.”

She closes her eyes like she’s utterly embarrassed. “I don’t mean to, but no matter how much I tell myself to shut up, once I start chewing, I make these sounds like—”

“You’re halfway to orgasm?”

Her face flushes redder. “Don’t say that.”

“It’s true.”

Corinne cocks her head. “If you don’t liquor up and butter up women for sex anymore, what do you do? Compliment them until they stop saying no? Whisper sexy suggestions in that voice that makes them squirm? Look at them with those eyes that burn past their self-control before you strip off their clothes and...then what?”

I shrug. “Whatever it takes. Shouldn’t every woman feel like a queen when she’s being pleased?”

Suddenly, Corinne shows renewed focus on her flan. One bite and she groans like orgasm is imminent. She presses her lips together and flattens her palms on the table like she's trying to hold back the inevitable peak. Damn, I can imagine her in my bed, underneath me, her eyes closed, her nails in my back, her chest rising and falling as desire overwhelms her.

I wish like hell I wasn't pouring her into bed tonight and leaving her to sleep off her buzz. I'd ten times rather be settling between her legs and hearing her sounds of satisfaction when I make her come.

Instead, I drag in a deep breath and try to defuse the tension. But her scent fills my nose and drives my lust higher. I'm seconds away from shelving strategy for ecstasy.

The waiter thankfully reappears with our coffee. I grip the delicate cup in my big hands and swallow the black brew, trying to grab my libido by the throat and choke it.

But it's awfully fucking strong.

So I pivot. "Tell me you don't agree with me. I hope for your sake that your boyfriend does."

Yes, I'm fishing. My approach isn't smooth, and I blame my visceral reaction to her for rattling me.

She's seemingly too flustered to notice, shifting in her chair again, her cheeks looking rosy, even by the restaurant's dim lighting, as she thumbs her plump bottom lip. "Why would I want a boyfriend who didn't?"

That doesn't answer my question, so I get more direct. Or maybe I'm just impatient because that mouth of hers... I want to feel it under mine. I want to hear it screaming my name in pleasure. I want to see it wrapped around my cock. I want it so bad I'm sweating. And I'm willing to fight dirty to have her. I just need to know who to crush. "Whoever he is, he's a lucky guy."

"There's no one now," she admits between moaning bites of her flan. "After my last breakup, I decided to take time to focus on myself and my business. I was just about to graduate, finals were crazy... Replacing him didn't seem urgent."

I hear two possible translations. One, the guy wasn't that exciting and she doesn't miss him. Or two, the asshole broke her heart and she's afraid to try again.

"If he let you go, don't sweat him. You can do better."

"Where do you come up with these lines? Do you save them in some slick mental vault or do they just occur to you in the moment?"

"Neither. I'm being honest. You, princess, I would treat like a goddamn queen between the sheets. Every moment we're together, I'd worship you."

She squirms in her seat again. I'm taking that as a sign of interest, especially since her hypnotic dark eyes cling to me. "Aren't you going to eat your flan? You haven't touched it."

And she's demolished hers, just like she threatened. Nice to know she can be softened with sugar and charmed with compliments. If we sat here and drank coffee long enough for her to sober up, what are the odds she'd let me take her to bed?

Reluctantly, I shutter the thought. As much as I want her, I want revenge more. Pissing away a chance at meaningful retribution for fleeting pleasure isn't smart. Besides, if I ever get Corinne into bed, I want to take my time. One night wouldn't be enough.

I spoon a bite of dessert in my mouth and set the plate aside. "It's very good."

"But you're not going to eat it?"

"I'd rather concentrate on something sweeter."

"Stop flirting."

"Why should I?"

"You don't mean it."

Interesting response, though understandable, given the situation. "You seem awfully sure of that."

"Men like you are never interested in women like me."

That isn't what I expected her to say. I lean back in my chair. "Meaning?"

"Smooth, experienced, worldly... You certainly didn't think much of me the first time we met."

"You were fourteen."

"Fifteen." Then she rolls her eyes. "I realize you were... what, twenty? I'm not shocked you weren't interested in me as a girl. But as a human being? You barely spoke to me."

And she seems hurt by that.

"Not because I was snubbing you." I could give her a million excuses, but she deserves the truth. "It was my first Christmas without my mom. Your house was more posh than anything I'd ever seen. And your grandparents weren't thrilled I'd invaded their holiday, especially when they realized you had a crush on me. I kept my distance for them."

"Oh. None of that registered in my teenage brain. I just... wished you liked me back. It seems silly to say that now."

"Not silly, honest. That's why I'm being honest, too. I want you."

She raises a dark brow at me. "I'm here for business, and I'm not in the market to make another mistake."

"What happened with the ex?"

"Nothing. It's over." Her indifferent expression is a lie.

"There's always a reason."

Corinne scowls. "What happened with your last girlfriend?"

"She fucked your brother behind my back and I ended the engagement, remember?"

"You haven't had a girlfriend since then?" She's shocked.

"I've realized I'm not a relationship kind of guy."

"Typical. After Riley—my ex—suddenly ended things after dating for nearly a year, I didn't swear off all men, just the ones who avoid commitment...which seem to be ninety-

nine percent of them, including you. We should say good night.” She stands, then braces herself on the table when she wobbles on her feet. “Oh, those drinks hit me harder than I thought.”

I lunge to her side, propping my hand under her elbow and wrapping an arm around her waist to steady her. “You all right?”

“My head was swimming. I’m okay now.”

I’m not taking a chance. “Let me get you to your room.” I gesture the waiter over and promise him an even fatter tip if he can run my card and haul back here quickly. He nods and takes off, returning in record time. With one hand still supporting Corinne, I scrawl my signature at the bottom of the receipt, slam down the pen, and pick up her clutch. “Let’s go.”

“Why are you helping me?” she asks as we shuffle to the elevator. “You hate my brother. The things he’s intimated about you in public must make life hard.”

She’s not wrong, but something about her under the influence of gin and champagne makes her seem more fragile than the woman who brazened her way into my office. Maybe that’s because I suspect Riley, the ex, hurt her. Or because—thanks to booze—I’m seeing the real her. It’s also possible she’s deceiving me. “It’s not easy, but that doesn’t make me hate you.”

Corinne snorts. “It just makes you want revenge. That’s why you’re being nice to me. You think I’m your golden ticket.”

Initially, that was true. Now, I’m nice because she intrigues me, too. But I have to stay focused. If I want revenge, she’s my key. I can’t let my morals, my stiff dick, or my feelings get in the way. “We can finish this discussion tomorrow. Let’s get you upstairs.”

“If you’re not going to give me a loan, we have nothing more to say.”

“I haven’t said no,” I point out as the elevator doors glide open. The fact I will is irrelevant. “In you go.”

With a sigh, she leans into the back corner of the car, her head lolling back. As soon as I press the button for her floor, she frowns. “How did you know what tower I’m in?”

Just a guess? Admitting that I’m having a PI dig into her life will piss her off, so I change the subject. “You said earlier that your room isn’t near Arthur’s.”

“True.” She frowns. “How did you know what floor I’m on?”

Shit. “I think you mentioned it earlier.”

“I didn’t.” Her frown becomes a scowl. “If you’re plying me with liquor, one-liners, and lies to get information about Parker from me, stop it.”

“You’re awfully suspicious.”

“Wouldn’t you be in my shoes?”

“You came to me, remember?”

She shrugs. “Doesn’t matter. You have no qualms about using my predicament to your advantage.”

“I could say the same to you, princess.”

“Who’s suspicious now? I just came for a loan.”

I crowd her into the corner, brace my forearm above her head, and lean in close. “Or to fuck me over.”

Our eyes meet. She stands frozen—except for the pulse pounding at her neck. “I’m not like that.”

Maybe she’s not. The woman I spent the evening with doesn’t seem conniving...but I know firsthand that looks can be deceiving, especially when a woman with ambition has a dream and a plan. Hadley taught me that well.

Since being this close to Corinne is messing with my head, I back away. Besides, we’re having a circular argument neither of us can win without proof, and despite the fact I’ve spent hours with her, I’m not any closer to zeroing in on her motives. I don’t like that. I’m not used to being unsure. I need the upper hand.

“What are your plans tomorrow? If you’re only staying on the island until Sunday morning, you should see as much of it as possible.”

She shakes her head. “I brought orders with me and my balcony has a decent view, so I’ll work from there.”

“That’s not a vacation.”

“It’s all the time away I can afford.”

“What do you need help with? Shipping, packing, answering emails, grabbing supplies...”

“All of it.” She sounds overwhelmed by her to-do list as the doors to the elevator open on her floor. “But—”

“How about we make a deal? I’ll get you help—it won’t cost you anything—if you’ll give me a few hours tomorrow.”

“For what?”

“Conversation.” By then, I’ll have a plan that ensures we both get what we’re after while lightening her load. It’s a win-win. “Say yes.”

She leads me down a breezeway, fishing in her clutch for her key before she slides it into the slot. When she opens the door and flips on the light, I stroll in behind her.

As rooms go, this one is substandard. It’s small, shoved beside a utility closet, and looks like it hasn’t been substantially remodeled in at least a decade. Through the thin wall, I can hear a massive water boiler buzzing. She has a view of some palm trees—and the parking lot.

Corinne works her ass off. She deserves better.

She keeps her space neat as a pin, except the desk, which she’s obviously commandeered for work. And like her apartment in LA, the chair looks uncomfortable and the surface too small for her purposes.

“What if I say no?”

I shrug. “Then I walk. And since you’re the one who needs money...”

“But you want something, too. Payback.”

“I won’t deny that, but I can go about it a ton of different ways. Where else are you going to get five million dollars?”

She hesitates. “I see why you have a reputation as a shark in financial circles.”

“I get what I want.”

Corinne sets her purse on a nearby dresser. “As much as I hate to add to your ego, all right. We’ll talk tomorrow. After all, my options are limited.”

She concedes that far more easily than I suspected. Is that the French 75s talking? Or her plan to keep me off-kilter?

Two can play that game...

“Don’t worry. I’ll give you a good time.” I wink.

She sends me a chiding glance. “Your definition of that and mine are probably different.”

Still, that’s a yes. With a smug smile, I hand her my phone. “Put in your number.”

Not that Owen hasn’t already emailed it to me, but Corinne doesn’t need to know that.

“I have a feeling I’m going to regret this.” But she complies before handing the device back to me.

“I’ll call you tomorrow and let you know what time I’ll be around.”

“Be prepared to hear more about my business and my plans. I’m going to make you say yes to that loan.”

“You’re welcome to try.”

“Listen...” She bites her rosy lower lip, hesitating like she’s reluctant to say more. “You should plan on keeping a low profile tomorrow. The movie hits theaters and...” She grimaces.

“That bad, huh?”

“Worse than the book.”

I expected Hollywood to make the truth even more salacious. What I didn't expect was for Corinne to warn me. She certainly didn't have to. Granted, it's in her best interest if she wants money and especially if she doesn't want her brother to know she's on the island with me, but... "Thanks for the tip. I'll give you one, too. Drink some water and take a few ibuprofen before bed."

"I will," she murmurs just before I slip out of her room.

The instant the door slams behind me, I glance at my phone, ignoring the ridiculous number of texts and voicemails—none from anyone important—and start making phone calls, the first to Owen. I don't give a shit what time it is. I'm on the clock.

"What can I do for you, Costa?"

"Give me everything you can find on Corinne Emerson's financials and background, especially about a guy she dated named Riley."

If I play this right, his loss will be my gain—at least temporarily—but the son of a bitch sounds like he deserves a punch.

"Already on it."

"I need it by tomorrow morning."

"You'll have a complete rundown by six a.m."

Not soon enough. "Get me whatever you've gathered by midnight. I'll look for the rest by morning."

Then I hang up and head home.

Time to start plotting the perfect way to take Parker down...and figure out how to handle my attraction to his little sister.



Since I was up until nearly two in the morning reading Owen's surprisingly thorough report, I'm not thrilled when my phone

starts buzzing furiously just before six. After last night, I forgot to turn the damn thing off again.

Fuck.

I grope around on my nightstand to find my cell on its charger, then squint at the screen. Maxon.

“Ello.”

“I figured I’d wake you. Sorry.”

“So why did you?”

My oldest brother pauses. “If you haven’t been online yet today, it’s...bad.”

It takes my fuzzy brain a moment to figure out what he means. “The movie?”

“Yeah. According to social media, you’re basically the Antichrist.”

Corinne warned me. And right on cue, my phone starts buzzing again... “I’m not shocked. Are you rethinking our partnership now?”

“No. And I’ve already talked to Griff. We’re on the same page.”

The tension in my gut uncoils some, but I need to check in with Bethany and Clint, too. “Thanks.”

“It’s just...we’re thinking it might be wise to hold the announcement about the partnership and put off the launch for another month or so. We’re *not* backing out. We want to make that very clear. This is strictly a strategic decision. Your press isn’t great right now”—my phone buzzes with more incoming texts—“and the venture will be more successful if we’re a few weeks removed from the negative coverage.”

Nothing he’s saying is wrong. In his position, I’d probably make the same choice. We all have a ton of money tied up in this pending venture, so none of us want it to fail. But goddamn it if this isn’t just another way for Parker to still be fucking me—years later—despite the fact he slept with my fiancée and fractured our friendship. “I get it.”

“I know you’re disappointed. We are, too. But we really think—”

“You don’t have to explain.” My phone vibrates with more rapidly incoming texts, as if to underscore reality. “I really do understand.”

“I want to make sure you do. Since Griff and I didn’t speak for three years, we both know how terrible it feels to lose your brother. He acknowledges that shit was on him and we’ve made our peace, but I want you to know we’ve both learned to put family first. We’re not going anywhere. This *will* happen and we’re proud to call you partner.”

Just not right now. More buzzing just pisses me off. Not three seconds later, I decline an incoming call from an unknown number. I’m beyond pissed at the whole situation, but I can’t blame my brothers.

Parker is another story.

“Thanks.”

“You’re coming to brunch on Sunday, right?”

It’s become a family tradition, and he’s making sure I’m not placating him before running off to lick my wounds. His concern is nice. Considerate, even—something Maxon isn’t in business, so I know he means it. “I’ll be there.”

His sigh sounds relieved. “See you then. Call me if you need anything.”

I might need a stiff drink by noon...but right now I have priorities. “You do the same.”

“And maybe shut your phone off for a while. You know, for some peace.”

Peace is a pie-in-the-sky dream. I’m ready to make war. “See you.”

He ends the call, and I climb out of bed, toss on some sweat shorts, and dial Clint, ignoring my phone’s almost nonstop vibrations. Bethany is probably feeding a baby right now, and I know how much she values that quiet time with the children she never thought she’d have.

Her husband answers on the first ring. “Howdy.”

His North Dakota greeting isn’t at all Hawaiian, but since I’m a transplant, too, I just smile. “I need to talk to you.”

“What’s up?”

Clint is a straight shooter; always has been. I appreciate that. “We intended to announce the fact I’ve become a full partner in the firm next week. How do you feel about the timing now?”

“After reading Twitter this morning?” He drags in a heavy breath. “You’re asking me, but I think you know waiting might be wise.”

I close my eyes. My stomach plummets to my toes. “How long?”

“I don’t know. Beth and I haven’t really talked about it. A month or two? After yesterday’s trading...”

It was awful, and today is off to another bad start. Rocking the boat isn’t a good idea when investors are already spooked.

“Yeah.” I swallow down my disappointment. “If you two would rather, I’ll resign and—”

“No! We wouldn’t rather that at all. The firm wouldn’t have survived the last three years without you, man. You’ve given us the luxury of having two kids back-to-back. Not only do we owe you, but we *want* you as a partner.”

I know he means that, and I need to rein in my disappointment. And try not to strangle the next paparazzi who reaches out to me for comment. “Thanks.”

“We should be the ones thanking you.” Then he pauses. “I know Barclay never acknowledging your existence must have hurt and that Parker Emerson was never any sort of friend since he’s raking you over the coals in public, but Beth and I would never do that to you. Your sister knows what it’s like to be betrayed by someone she trusted and loved.”

From all accounts, our father was a raging asshole to all his children, but especially Bethany, throwing her under the bus to the feds when his Ponzi house-of-cards began to fall

down. Yet she came back from that and found love with a man who had once made revenge against her his mission in life.

“It sucks.”

“She won’t turn her back on you. Neither will I. Just give this some time to die down.”

Like Maxon’s, Clint’s response is perfectly rational. It’s smart, measured, and tactical, too.

But this whole situation—and my phone now rattling endlessly—makes me rage.

Still, I can’t be angry with my family. They could have dropped me altogether, abandoned me the way our biological father did. The way Hadley did. Instead, they’re sticking by me. I just need to be a big boy, deal with my disappointment, and make lemonade out of lemons.

The burning for revenge that dimmed while I was with Corinne last night sparks to red-hot life again.

“Yeah,” I assure him. “Just let me know when you and Bethany are ready to proceed.”

“It won’t be long, just until things are quieter so our clients will be excited about the announcement. Holding off works in our favor, anyway. The lawyers haven’t quite finished with the paperwork yet. One is getting married next weekend, so this will give him more time. I’d rather have a good job than a rushed job.”

More logic I can’t argue with. “Sure. I think I’ll work remotely today, unless you and Bethany have an objection.”

“No, it’s probably wise. Besides, you’re a partner in all but name, man. You make your own decisions. And we’ll be in the office to cover things shortly. Just lie low today. And a word of advice? Avoid social media and shit stirrers like TMZ. Apparently they never heard that if you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.”

Most are cowards hiding behind their keyboards, pretending they’re shining a light on society’s wrongs. It’s

utter bullshit and I don't need more negativity in my life. "Will do."

"Talk to you later."

"Absolutely."

"See you at Sunday brunch?" Clint, like Maxon, seems determined to make sure I still feel like part of the family.

It's nice to be wanted...but if it wasn't for the happy accident of having Barclay Reed's blood running through my veins, I'd have none of these people in my life. Other than my high school friends, I can't think of a single person left who loves me for me.

And now I sound like a pouting little bitch.

"I'll be there," I assure Clint.

We end the call. I resist the urge to hurl my phone against the wall—barely—and instead flop back on my bed to glare at the ceiling. *Motherfucking Parker!* Why won't he get the hell out of my life? Oh, because he's making a fortune off of bashing me and blaming me for his woes.

It's freaking early, and after so little sleep, I should feel exhausted. Weirdly, I don't, especially after a masochistic peek at Twitter. Yeah, I swore I wouldn't look, but I need to understand the bullshit I'm up against.

It's every bit as ugly as I suspected. Lots of comments about the apple not falling far from the tree since I'm just the latest in a string of Barclay Reed's sharkish, money-hungry offspring. But I'm particularly vile because of how I abused and bullied poor Parker—totally unprovoked, of course—simply for malice.

Some people have the nerve to suggest it's a good thing my mother is dead because she'd be ashamed if she could see me now. Even more egregious comments suggest she must not have been much of a mother if she raised an asshole like me.

Since I've long thought this platform is a cesspool of haters, I close it and peruse some popular financial sites and blogs. Unfortunately, the coverage about me there isn't more

positive. Oh, they included the fact that I seem to have the Reeds' Midas touch in growing money, but that's where the praise stops. Again, most drag my siblings through the mud with me, especially Bethany. I'll give credit to the restrained few who point out that the media is only broadcasting one side of the story. But they're waiting for me to comment. That's not happening.

I'm not giving the vultures a damn word to feed on.

I have a better idea—one I've been crafting and honing all night.

Palming my still-humming phone, I head downstairs and drive myself through a hard morning workout to give one last think through my possibilities. After a punishing hour, followed by a long shower, then coffee and eggs, I keep coming back to my immovable resolution. Parker is going down. And the plan that's been swirling in my head since last night—the one I initially second-guessed as being too aggressive, high-handed, and cutthroat? It's just become priority one.

Smiling, I reach for my phone to set my plan in motion.

chapter **FOUR**

Late that afternoon, I arrive at Corinne's hotel with a hard heart, ready to drive an even harder bargain. I raise my fist to knock on her door—a different one than last night.

Everything is in place.

Sneaking around this thoroughly average resort makes me feel like a pariah. I've resorted to disguising myself in an LA Dodgers ball cap, an overlarge blue T-shirt, and a pair of shorts with flip-flops. Coupled with my aviators, I blend in with all the other tourists who have come to the island to kick back.

But I'm ready to kick ass.

Corinne opens the door, dressed in a vacation-approved sundress. I've seen a ton of these, especially since I moved to Maui.

I've never seen one that made my jaw drop.

It's simple, pale yellow cotton with vivid pink and blue flowers and a flirty ruffle at the hem. But that's where the garment's resemblance to a typical sundress ends. The figure-hugging wraparound hangs just above mid-thigh—except where the two halves meet in the middle, mere inches below her pussy, exposing a long expanse of gorgeous legs. The straps perched on her shoulders are tied in thin, floppy bows. If I pluck on those strings and give a little tug, she'd be next to naked.

The thought makes me instantly hard.

Goddamn it, her body isn't what I should be focused on.

"Hi," she murmurs. "I thought you were going to call."

I need her off guard. "Can I come in?"

"Okay." As she steps back, she fidgets like she's nervous.

She should be. I won't take no for an answer.

Corinne shuts the door behind me. “Nice disguise.”

“I can’t go anywhere looking like me.”

“Not unless you want a lot of attention.”

“And I don’t. Were you hung over this morning?”

“No. Water and ibuprofen did the trick. I won’t be drinking that much tonight—or for a long time.” Her smile is self-deprecating. “I guess you’re the reason the hotel suddenly decided to upgrade me to a suite last night?”

“Your room was too small. You needed space to work. I made a phone call.”

“Why?”

Obviously, I need her cooperation if I’m going to dig out of this PR hole and get revenge. Despite that, and the fact she’s Parker’s sister, I can’t deny that I like her. She’s plucky, interesting, and sexy as fuck.

“Why not?” I shrug. “Do you like it?”

“Who wouldn’t like an ocean-view suite? I slept better last night without listening to that boiler grinding and sputtering. And I got a lot of work done today, since I had enough space to spread out and organize. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I came with a proposition. I think I’ve found a way we can help each other.”

“Good.” She wanders toward the seating area. “How are you, you know, now that the movie is out?”

Naturally, she’s read the bullshit press, too.

“More pissed off than I was yesterday.”

“And more determined than ever to have revenge?”

“Do you blame me?”

She sidesteps my question. “If loaning me money to help me succeed in spite of my brother isn’t enough retribution, what would be?”

“I’d rather sit and talk about my idea.”

“All right.” She perches in a tastefully floral chair in the sitting area with stunning views of the resort’s lush foliage, swimming pools, and the Pacific beyond.

I choose the sofa beside her and waste no time. “Have your goals changed since you walked into my office yesterday morning?”

“No. I can’t give up my business just because my brother thinks he knows better.”

I’ve wondered a dozen times how Parker thinks she’s going to manage with the resources she has, but I doubt he’s thought through that. Or cares. He’s probably too busy with his Hollywood life and too convinced he’s right. “And I’ve got some business ventures in the works that could use positive press, so let’s help each other.”

“How?”

I reach into the pocket of my shorts, withdraw a small velvet box, and pop open the lid. “Say yes...and I’ll be your fake fiancé.”

She gasps, her dark eyes going wide. “Are you crazy?”

I shake my head. “Determined.”

Her stare bounces from the three carats of princess-cut diamond I picked up an hour ago to my face. “Is that real?”

“Yes. The jeweler merely lent it to me, so don’t lose it. I’d rather not have to cough up a hundred grand.”

Corinne gapes at me. “I told you I was kidding when I said I needed a fiancé.”

“You did, but it makes sense.”

“What makes sense is a loan. I don’t need a scheme that merely might net me my inheritance.”

“You’re underestimating how much Parker hates me. He’ll give you your inheritance to keep us from getting married. And in the meantime, the press and public will wonder how evil I can possibly be if Parker’s sister is planning to marry me.”

She bites her lip like she's thinking. It takes everything I have not to rush her. And not to kiss that rosy, lush mouth she keeps abusing with her teeth.

“My brother might dig in his heels and wait us out, see if we're pretending. He knows damn well we haven't been dating. I haven't dated anyone since Riley.” A sadness I don't like crosses her face.

Owen's report says the guy is the son of a schoolteacher and a plumber. Corinne met him in college during summer break two years ago. While she was matriculating in San Diego, Riley attended NYU's Stern School of Business, funded by scholarships and a mountain of student loans. He came to the West Coast with buddies to blow off some steam. The two met by chance in a restaurant and maintained a long-distance relationship for eleven and a half months. After graduation almost a year ago, Riley found a mid-level job at a decent brokerage, where he isn't highly regarded and has a client list of modest suburban investors. He purchased an engagement ring with his first paycheck...then returned it a week later. Apparently, his phone call to Corinne the following day was his last.

“Parker *thinks* you haven't been seeing anyone for a while. Tell him we've been sneaking behind his back and that I proposed. We're madly in love, so you said yes.”

“He's going to want proof of that.”

I smile. “I was counting on it. We'll lay the PDA on thick and—”

“That's not going to work. I'm leaving for LA in twenty-four hours.”

“If you agree to this plan, you can't.”

“But I have a life and a business and—”

“If you want to keep them, you'll let me slide this ring on your finger and postpone your return to LA indefinitely.” When Corinne gears up for another objection, I cut her off. “Look at it this way, if we were actually engaged, if you truly pledged to spend the rest of your life with me, why would you

be returning to Cali and leaving me behind? Unless it's to pack up your apartment and move here—”

“Why wouldn't you move to LA?”

“My business and my family are here, I bought a house as an investment last year, and it's paradise. Why wouldn't you move to Maui, where you'll be farther away from your brother, making it harder for him to control you?”

Her expression tells me she sees my point, but she's still unconvinced. “I don't see how this will work. I have orders to fulfill. Responsibilities. Where would I even stay? The crappy room I had was at the top of my budget. This one... I don't even want to ask how much it costs.”

I lean even closer. “Move in with me. I have a six-bedroom house. Pick one as your office. A bunch of my family have volunteered to pitch in to help you with things like customer service and packing up your orders. I'll do your accounting and taxes. While we're 'engaged,' you won't have to grocery shop, cook, clean, or run a single errand. I'll manage everything. You only have to make watch bands...and be seen with me.”

Corinne gapes at me for so long, I'm sure she's going to say no. She doesn't. “You're insane.”

“Or hell-bent on not letting Parker win.”

“He'll be furious,” she warns.

That's icing on the cake. “Are you really prepared to give up your business because your brother will have a hissy?”

“No. But you're not the one he'll yell at.”

Oh, I'm sure I'll hear from the little bastard, but that will be my pleasure. “You didn't come all the way to Hawaii to ask me for help only to give up at the first sign of trouble, did you? When Parker withheld your inheritance, he didn't seem to care much about your feelings. If you had wanted the money to party your way through Europe or to give to some internet scam, I could understand his decision to let you grow up before he turns you loose with millions of dollars. But you've been succeeding for four years. You're ready to expand. What

real reason does he have to hold you back, other than he doesn't like your choice of jobs?"

"My brother can be stubborn and annoying. His methods suck. But he wants what's best for me."

Corinne sounds desperate to believe that Parker loves her and is merely guiding her to the best possible future. I get it, but she's being naive. "He wants to control you."

"And you don't?"

"You're completely free to say no and do whatever the hell you want. Would Parker give you that freedom? Besides, why should you have to go into debt to keep from pissing him off?"

Corinne rises, paces. "I know you're right, but I'm usually a pleaser and a peacekeeper. This means going to war with the very last member of my family."

"I'm suggesting that if you're going after what you want, you should be prepared to do it as ruthlessly as he is. When you prove him wrong, he'll come around. I doubt he wants to lose you, either."

"That's a huge gamble."

"A lot of things in life are."

"I need to think about it. Give me an hour?"

It isn't the enthusiastic *hell yes* I wanted. But it's not *fuck off* either.

I pocket the ring and rise. "Sure. Tell you what. I'll send a car for you at seven. If you want to talk about this more, get in the car and have dinner with me. If you don't"—I shrug—"I wish you the best, princess."



By seven fifteen, I'm seated at the bar of a swanky restaurant on the beach, staring at the door. Thankfully, Maxon and Griff helped Duke Mason, the owner of this steakhouse, buy a new house a few months back, so they called in a favor. I've got a

private room tucked in the back. Corinne and I will have total privacy to hash out our scheme, away from the prying ears and eyes of gossipmongers. I'll need it because I suspect she'll balk at some of my terms and conditions.

If she shows at all.

I glance at my watch again. Seven twenty. I'm getting antsy, sifting through my possibilities for recourse because I'm not giving up—on revenge or her.

Across the room, a member of the host staff pulls the heavy door open and Corinne appears, the last of twilight backlighting her body.

My thoughts stop. My cock gets hard.

Since her dress is nearly the same color as her skin, she looks almost naked. The strapless ensemble gathers at her small waist with a knot of fabric off to one side, hugs her hips, clings to her luscious ass, then flares out again at mid-thigh with an elegant ruffle that shows off calves made even more graceful by her sexy slingbacks.

Holy shit. Corinne turned my head the first time I laid eyes on her, but tonight not only did she come to talk, she came dressed to slay. I'll have to stay on my A-game or she'll derail my every train of thought—except the ones about sex.

Dragging in a steadying breath, I stand, toss back the last of my scotch, then head in her direction as she scans the dining room.

Our stares meet. My heart pounds as I hold out my hand. "I'm glad you came."

She takes it, looking me up and down with dark, unreadable eyes. "Your suit is a definite step up from the tacky tourist garb earlier."

This one is a favorite—pale gray with a black dress shirt and coordinating wingtips, no tie. I look put together and powerful but approachable. And I stay in shape so I wear my suits well. "You look incredible."

"Thank you," she murmurs. "I came so we can discuss—"

“Not here. Follow me.” I lead her through the open, casually elegant restaurant.

When I reach our private room, the owner is waiting for me, hand outstretched. “Xavian?”

I shake his in return. “Nice to meet you, Duke.”

“Likewise. Your brothers said you can’t even get a moment’s peace for a simple date. They weren’t kidding.”

People are staring. A few are even surreptitiously snapping pics on their phone. “Thank you for accommodating us on short notice. I appreciate it. For the record, don’t believe everything you hear about me.”

“I’ve been around long enough to know that things are rarely what they seem. Besides, your brothers aren’t universally liked, but they’re respected. I get the feeling you’re cut from the same cloth.” He leads us in and closes the door behind us. “Ailani will be your server this evening. If you need anything at all, she’ll take care of it. Everyone else on staff has strict orders not to disturb you.”

“If I can ever return the favor, let me know.”

With a gracious nod, Duke disappears. The next few minutes are a flurry of activity. I ask for another scotch. Corinne opts for iced tea. Ailani pours us water while reciting the daily specials. I order a couple of appetizers.

“I’ll be back with those shortly,” the server assures before she leaves.

Corinne and I are finally alone. Silence falls, except some soft, piped-in music. I recognize “Hawaiian Paradise,” an island classic. I lean in, trying not to undress her with my stare. Business first, then... Well, the evening is young. “I’m glad you came.”

“Just to talk. I’m not agreeing to anything yet, but I thought about what you said.” She exhales and seemingly gathers her words. “You’re right. When Parker hijacked my career, he didn’t care about my feelings. I doubt he even considered them. He’s so convinced I’m making a huge mistake I’ll come to regret.”

“The same way he felt about Hadley.”

Corinne frowns. “He was right about her.”

I nod. “And I should have seen it coming. But it wasn’t his responsibility to save me from my own decisions. Now he’s pulling the same overbearing bullshit on you. You might be his sister, but you’re an adult, capable of making your own choices.”

“Exactly.” She glances up at me through thick black lashes. “Tell me how you see this scheme working if I say yes. How would it play out?”

“First off, I have no doubt people in the dining room have already posted photos of us on social media.”

“The public doesn’t know my face the way they know yours. Parker, for all his faults, has done a good job of keeping me removed from the spotlight.”

Most likely for reasons that stroked his ego far more than protected Corinne. “It won’t take internet sleuths long to identify you. The gossip might be good for your business, too.”

She flashes me a sly half smile. “While I don’t need more, I won’t turn it down.”

“Then brace yourself.”

The online gossip will bug the shit out of Parker and send him scrambling to make calls. He’ll dial Corinne first, demanding to know what she’s doing with me. If she doesn’t want to answer, we’ll let his call go to voicemail. He can rage there. If she wants to talk to him, fine. But if he tries to bully her again? He’ll have to come through me.

Slowly, she nods, seeming to turn the possibilities over in her head. “What happens next?”

“We leave here with your hand wrapped around my arm and my ring on your finger—one you weren’t wearing when you walked in—giving the other diners lots of PDA. Social media will start buzzing with speculation. Those images won’t take long to reach gossip rags. Or your brother.”

“Oh, my gosh. He’s going to lose his mind.”

I grin. “It will be good for him. Builds character.”

“You’re a smart-ass.”

“Just one of my many charming qualities.”

“Along with your humility?”

I shrug, my grin becoming a laugh. “We’ll give Parker twenty-four hours to stew. Tomorrow, we’ll make a statement officially announcing our engagement. Afterward, my brother and sister-in-law, Maxon and Keeley, will throw us an engagement party at their bed-and-breakfast.”

“Tomorrow? That’s fast.”

“Why wait? We’ll invite enough of the island’s movers and shakers to make it look legit. Since my sister Harlow is married to Noah Weston—”

“Wait. *The* Noah Weston? Five-time Pro-Bowler and one of the best all-time passing quarterbacks? That Noah Weston?”

“That one.”

She gasps. “I’ve seen Harlow’s picture. She’s incredibly beautiful. I didn’t realize she’s your sister.”

“Don’t feel bad; I didn’t realize it, either, until well after they were married. And I’m impressed you know football.”

Corinne grins. “At first it was one of those things I learned because Parker hated it so much. He thought me liking sports, except gymnastics and figure skating, was unladylike. Information about football wasn’t super easy to get when I was in boarding school and I hate that I missed watching Weston’s final Super Bowl, but I loved seeing him play.”

“You and my brother Evan’s wife, Nia, can fawn together over his on-field moves. Harlow will roll her eyes and poke fun at you both.” Before she teases her husband about the many ways she’ll have to deflate his ego...among other things. “We’ll have brunch with the family on Sunday so you can get to know everyone when it’s more relaxed.”

Corinne bites her lip. “Do you plan to involve your family? Will they know we’re not really engaged?”

Maxon, Keeley, and Griff already know. The rest? “I hate to deceive them...but they’ll help convince the rest of the world that we’re completely in love and intend to get married if they believe it’s real, too.”

“Seems like you’ve thought this through.”

“Most of last night.” And I’ve thought of everything... except what to do about my friends. Echo and Hayes will want to come for my engagement party, even if it’s last-minute. They’ll be hurt if I don’t include them. I’d rather not lie to them, but if I come clean, they’d have to keep my secret. Untruths make Echo uncomfortable. And the more people in on our scheme, the less likely it is to stay hidden.

“It shows. But you know Parker; he’s stubborn. It will take more than an engagement announcement and a party to convince him we’re serious.”

“Since we know how he thinks, we’ll devise some logical countermeasures so we’re ready once he punches back. We’ll do whatever it takes to make sure you get your money before your business is negatively impacted. But until your brother gives in, I’ll make sure you get help.”

“I appreciate that.”

“So you’re on board?”

She shakes her head. “Hang on. I have another question.”

Before Corinne can ask, Ailani returns with our drinks. “Appetizers should be out soon. Would you like to order dinner?”

We do. I’m impatient to fill in the blanks so Corinne will stop hesitating and say yes, but I merely smile while she asks our waitress about the menu. Finally, she chooses the ahi steak. I order a filet and a baked potato.

When we’re alone again, I turn all my attention back to her. “Tell me your question. I have an answer.”

“What’s your end game? What does a satisfying revenge look like to you?”

I’ve been so fixated on that sweet, sweet moment Parker realizes his sister is choosing me over him that I didn’t think about the end of our “romance.” What I really want—for people to know the truth about Hadley and my past with Parker—won’t happen. Public perception is set, and anything I say now looks like damage control and whining. “Good point. If I call off the wedding and seem to break your heart, that reinforces everything negative about me.”

“But it would infuriate my brother. You know how siblings are. We can insult one another horribly, but the moment anyone else does, watch out.”

Actually, I don’t know since I grew up an only child. I have siblings now, but the Reeds are a different breed. Since they’re competitive through and through, they haven’t always been there for one another. For years, Barclay turned them against each other, taught them to think of their own brothers and sisters as competition to be crushed. Thankfully, they’re tight these days. “What are you suggesting?”

“If I break things off, people will assume I finally saw your ‘true colors.’ At the very least, Parker looks justified for the things he said. But if you break things off because you found someone else, that doesn’t make you look like a bully, just a manwhore.”

“Good point.” Since my reputation for debauchery is set, that’s probably our best out. I would have realized that sooner if being this close to Corinne wasn’t jacking up my libido and clouding my brain. “I’ll break your heart, then.”

“I had a semester of drama in college. I can act appropriately devastated.”

“For the record, I won’t relish even pretending to hurt you.”

Her dark eyes chide me. “You have to get into the role to be believable.”

She's right. "I'll work on an exit strategy. Unfortunately, we don't know how long it will take your brother to concede defeat and give you your inheritance. It could be weeks or months..."

"Parker is nothing if not stubborn."

"Are you saying yes to being my fake fiancée now?"

"There's a lot of ground we haven't covered yet, and I still have concerns."

Ailani appears again with our appetizers and sets them between us. "Be careful. These are hot."

"Thank you. Would you also bring us a hula pie with two spoons after dinner?"

"Of course." She nods.

"Dessert, again?" Corinne groans as soon as our waitperson leaves the room. "You're killing my diet."

"You don't need one, trust me. But you have to have hula pie," I assure her. "Macadamia nut ice cream on chocolate cookie crust, topped with hot fudge, toasted nuts, and whipped cream."

She sighs like she's in love. "If you thought I moaned like I was nearing orgasm the last time you watched me eat, just wait."

"Why do you think I ordered it?" I quip.

"Spoken like a true manwhore...which brings me to my hesitation. How will we handle your sex life during our 'engagement?' You'll have to be discreet or word will get out before we're ready and—"

"It won't." We're getting to the terms and conditions Corinne will object to. "But thanks to your brother, my profile is too high to walk into a bar and pick up a woman without half the internet knowing inside an hour."

She nibbles that pouty lip like she knows I'm right and it's a problem. "So what's the plan? Will you just do without until my stubborn brother lets up?"

“No.”

“Then I don’t understand how you’re going to manage this.” She presses her lips into a thin, white line. “Since your decision affects me, I have a right to know. But I guess you have women you can call—flings, friends with benefits, casual hookups...”

Is it my imagination or is Corinne less than pleased with the prospect of me in bed with someone else? Her expression says so. It’s perverse, but the fact she seemingly cares about who and what I do thrills me.

“Impossible. The second I touch any of them, they could run to the press, who will pay big bucks for the raunchy inside scoop of how I cheated on you. And our whole plan will be down the toilet.”

That’s the truth...but not the whole truth. I don’t want Emma, my last fling. Maxie, my usual friend with benefits, can’t keep her mouth shut. She already sold the story of our on-again, off-again sex life to a tabloid a few months back. And my last casual hookup, Jacinda, is leaving the island in a handful of hours.

But the biggest reason I’m pushing back? I want Corinne. I desire her in my bed, under me, calling my name, taking me deep, available to me day and night, scratching her nails into my back as she screams out in ecstasy. I can’t deny I’ll get the satisfaction of knowing Parker will picture all of that—and it will kill him. But actually taking this woman to bed and having her completely mine? That pleasure is all for me.

“What are you saying?” she asks with wide eyes.

But she knows; her trembling tells me.

“The only sex I’ll be having is with you.”

She blinks and sits back in her chair. “But it’s a fake engagement.”

“With benefits.” I smile. “Our relationship can’t seem fake or no one will believe us. Besides, the way I want you, princess, is very real.”

Corinne is probably thinking that I'm coercing her into bed. But I'll treat her better than Riley Stephens ever did. I'll heap the kind of bliss on her she's only imagined. I'll make damn sure she doesn't regret a minute with me.

It's my problem that I wish she'd sought me out because she wants more from me than help with her brother. But I'm not worried. When our passion heats up and I melt her into the mattress, she'll get on board. I'll just have to remember that she isn't with me because she gives a shit. She only cares about what I can do for her.

"Why?" she breathes. "You barely know me."

I know enough to know she's smarter than Maxie. She's hotter than Emma. And she's both sexier and wittier than Jacinda. If I ever compiled a list of qualities in my perfect woman, Corinne would fit the bill.

She's still blinking at me, waiting for an answer.

I shrug. "There's something between us—"

"Yeah, deception and revenge."

"Chemistry and lust. Ours is undeniable. Even if I can't explain it, I feel it. But if sex is a deal-breaker for you, say so. We'll forget the whole scheme."

Corinne gapes at me. "You'd really give up a chance for revenge because I won't go to bed with you?"

"Our ploy won't work if I'm fucking anyone else." I lean across the small table and plant myself inches from her. "Are you really that eager for me to crawl between someone else's thighs when I know you want me, too?"

"That's not true."

"Yes, it is. I know a woman's body."

"I don't sleep around."

"Good. While we're 'engaged,' you're mine."

"I'm not explaining this well." She sighs. "I'm not having sex with any man until he puts a ring on my finger."

“I plan to, remember?”

“I mean for real.”

Is that an excuse...or is she saying what I think she's saying? “Are you a virgin?”

Corinne shifts in her seat, then nods. “I'm sure you think that's ridiculous or fairy tale—”

“I don't.” But it's unexpected. She never went to bed with Riley? Not once in almost a year?

“The thing is, I doubt I can connect on that level with someone I barely know. And I want my first time to be special.”

On paper, taking my enemy's little sister's innocence should be sufficiently sinister and satisfying. But looking into Corinne's solemn eyes, knowing I'd be the very first man to touch her, to claim her, does something to me—beyond making my dick hard. That kick to my gut urging me to seduce her as soon as possible and make her mine? That's not coming strictly from my libido.

Fuck, this game could get dangerous. Still, that's not stopping me.

If I was noble, I would leave her untouched.

But I'm not.

Instead, I take her hand. “I'll give you a special night. I'll make you feel like the most desirable, well-pleasured woman in the world. All you have to do is agree to my plan, let me slide this ring on your finger, and come home with me.”

“Now?” She looks stunned.

“Why wait?”

“Because the sex won't mean anything to you. Neither will I.”

“You're wrong.” But trying to explain the feelings I don't even understand would be stupid.

“I’m sure it makes sense to you. Taking me to bed is a great revenge. Since you’re a manwhore, you’re...equipped to make the sex good, but—”

“The way you moan over dessert is polite compared to the way I’ll make you scream.”

Corinne cracks a smile. “There’s that humility of yours again...”

“What can I say?” I shrug like I don’t have a care in the world. “You bring out the best in me.”

Ailani makes her way through the door with a professional smile. “Dinner should be in ten minutes. Or would you rather wait a bit longer?”

The conversation is just getting good. “Make it thirty.”

When our server nods and slips out, I knock back a long swallow of scotch. “You didn’t come to me for my humility. You came to me because you needed someone on your side who will stand up to your brother’s bullshit. I’m not forcing you to do anything, just giving you my terms.”

“Even if they’re horrible?”

“You’re not going to shame me out of this.”

Corinne frowns and picks at the plate of coconut shrimp. “A fake engagement solves my problem, and I know you’d never cave to Parker. Honestly, I came here prepared to say yes. But I need some time before we...”

“Fuck?” I try to shutter my impatience. That long-ago Christmas aside, she’s known me less than forty-eight hours. Not many girls give up their V-card to a guy they barely know. “I can give you a few days, but you have to let me touch you. You have to look used to my hands and my lips on you or we won’t pass public muster.”

“I know.” She sounds rattled.

I soften against my will. “It will be fine. I really will make it good.”

She doesn't reply, merely nibbles on a shrimp, then closes her eyes with a groaning little sigh that makes my cock twitch. "Hmm, how did you find this place?"

"Like I have everything else on this island, through my siblings and their spouses."

"It must have been so odd to go from having no family to having a ton of it."

"Very." I pop a tasty shrimp in my mouth, too, letting her change of subject slide. "It's crazy that I'm now an uncle to more than a dozen little ankle biters, with more on the way."

Corinne tsks. "Ankle biters? That's horrible. You don't like kids?"

"Actually, I love them. Family gatherings are insane, and I thought I'd hate having to deal with all the diapers and crying and whatever...but the more time I spend with the kids, the more I enjoy them. By the way, I wouldn't tell just any woman that. It would devastate my manwhore reputation."

"My lips are sealed." She smiles. "Do you want your own kids someday?"

"Yeah. It's a little terrifying since I didn't have a dad. What do I know about parenting? But I've watched all my brothers and brothers-in-law man up and really be there for their children. They tell me there's nothing more satisfying."

"But they have wives, too."

I shrug like it's obvious, but I can't deny they're all neck-deep in parenting with their soul mate, the person who understands them, will never leave them, and will forever want them for them.

Every woman I meet only wants me for my money, my influence, or my cock.

"There's no rush. I'm still a few years from thirty. I have time before my biological clock starts ticking."

She laughs, her tension melting away. I like this carefree Corinne. I like making her smile even more.

“What about you?” I ask. “Kids?”

“Yeah,” she breathes like she can’t wait. “I want at least two and I want them close in age.”

The vision of her round and pregnant kicks my libido into overdrive. It’s all I can do not to drag her across the table, into my lap, lay my lips on hers, work my hand under her dress... and see if I can manually persuade her to say yes to more than my scheme.

Whoa. I need to reel that back. I’m here to get revenge with this woman. Of course I want to fuck her, too. But I’m not actually marrying her. We’re not having babies together.

“Why?” I ask.

“I’d love for my kids to have a totally different relationship than the one I have with Parker. We were born too many years apart to have much in common. I don’t know if it’s because he’s older or because he’s male, but he thinks it’s his right to boss me around.”

“He’s just a standard bully. If you tell him to fuck right off, he’ll back down. He won’t have a choice.”

“I’ve stopped listening to him. He used to help me with rent every so often if I had a lackluster sales month or he’d offer occasionally helpful advice. He negotiated the price of my car, and he fixed my clogged kitchen sink that threatened to overflow at two in the morning because my landlord didn’t answer the phone. But in the last three weeks, after I asked for my inheritance and he refused, we’ve barely spoken.”

“Being seen with me is going to motivate him to pick up the phone fast.”

She grimaces. “It’s been vibrating in my purse for the past ten minutes.”

So he knows. I should be gleeful. The son of a bitch is probably angry and sweating, impotently raging that she’s with me and wondering what I’m doing to her right now. Good... except does Corinne know what she’s in for? It’s not my problem...but I feel compelled to make sure she understands.

“Princess, your brother is going to be furious. Being with me might do irreparable damage to your relationship. If you can’t live with that, you should leave now, because once we start, there’s no going back.” Why the fuck am I warning her away?

“No, he already did the damage when he refused to help my business and insulted my career.”

“He’s also the last of your family, and I know what it’s like to be alone.”

“I have friends.”

I shake my head. “It’s not the same. I want you to really think about that.”

“Are you suddenly backing out of being my fake fiancé because I’m reluctant to spread my legs for you?”

“I’m telling you that some things, once done, can’t be undone. Like Parker sleeping with Hadley. He didn’t just prove his point, he destroyed my relationship with her. My friendship with him? Gone, too. In an instant. I never trusted him again.”

She cocks her head. “You don’t trust women, either. Is that why you sleep with everything in a skirt and never let one close?”

I hate the way Corinne sees through me right now. “You’re reading too much into the fact I like sex.”

“You’ve made that clear. And if our ‘engagement’ drags on for a couple of months, can you really handle not screwing your usual variety of party girls, tourists, and strippers?”

She’s asking if I’m capable of being faithful. It’s an encouraging step because she wouldn’t ask if it didn’t matter. And it only matters if she’s considering saying yes.

“As long as I’m getting it from you, I’ll manage. But I’ll warn you. I have a very active sex drive.” She deserves to know that up front.

A blush stains her cheeks. “Wow, you’re just...putting it out there.”

“Would you rather I lie?”

“No.”

“Does the fact I’d want hot, frequent sex bother you?”

“Bother? No. It’s...unnerving.”

“Because?”

“A lot of reasons. I’ve already gone into some. And it’s not like I know what I’m doing.”

“In bed?” I recline against my chair and toss back the last of my scotch. “Princess, if you say yes, by the time I’m through with you, you’ll be a sexpert.”

Her eyes widen. “Did you really just say that?”

“I did.” I raise a brow at her. “You think I’m kidding?”

“No, but the idea of sleeping with you...”

“We won’t be sleeping.”

“Stop trying to make me nervous.”

A possibility I didn’t consider sooner smacks me in the face. “Did someone hurt you? Force you to—”

“No,” she reassures me. “No man has ever done anything like that against my will, thank goodness. It’s you. *You* make me nervous.”

Does she realize that she’s basically admitting she’s attracted to me? “Don’t be. I’ll make you feel damn good.”

“If you’re going to pleasure me, shouldn’t I feel like a queen? That’s what you said...”

I take her hand and press my lips to her palm. “Every chance you’ll let me. So, are you saying yes?”

She purses her lips together. “Let me think about it over dinner.”

Either Corinne is hesitating because she’s reluctant to throw herself into the proverbial fire or because she wants to see me sweat. If the latter, she’s kidding herself. Yes, I want to fuck her. I’m a man and she’s hotter than hell. But since she’s

running short on options to get her hands on cash, she needs me more than I need her. Other opportunities to punch back at Parker will come. If I'm the reason for her hesitation, I'll set her at ease. I might be a bastard, but I'm not heartless.

I nod. "If you need, sure."

We polish off the appetizers in silence. When our waitress comes to refill our drinks, I ask her to go ahead and bring the meal. A few minutes later, she's setting our plates in front of us.

"Can I recommend a rosé with your tuna?" Ailani rattles off some winery from Provence that sounds obscure and expensive.

"Please."

So she's already breaking her vow not to drink again for a while. I really do make her nervous. I'll need to prove that I would never hurt her. Make her body twist, writhe, buck, and sweat? Yes. Every fucking day. Every fucking time.

She picks at her food and orders a second glass of wine. I repress a smile.

I polish off the last of my rare steak and set my utensils aside. I can't resist toying with her. "You don't like your tuna?"

"It's fine." She gulps more wine.

"Glad to hear it. When you're done eating, I'll look forward to your answer."

"Besides being a manwhore, you're a pushy bastard."

"I'm just letting you play your game, princess. Let me know when you're bored and want to get down to it."

She drags in a deep breath. "Suppose I say yes. I need tonight to myself. Tomorrow morning, I'll pack up my stuff, come to your house, and—"

"Are you serious about getting your brother to cede control of your money or not?"

"Yes."

“Are you sure? Because waiting only postpones the inevitable and increases the chances someone will see through our ruse. If we’re going to do this, we’re starting tonight. I’ve promised I’ll give you a couple of days to get used to me before we have sex. I’ve sworn I’ll make it good for you. That’s all I’m willing to give. The rest is up to you. Yes or no?”

Ailani chooses that moment to take our plates away. “Coffee?”

I’d love another scotch, but I need a clear head. “Please.”

“Another wine?” Corinne asks.

For what happens tonight, she needs to be completely sober. “No. She’ll have either coffee or water.”

She glowers. “Water, please.”

As soon as our server leaves, Corinne turns on me. “You’ll have to be less high-handed if we’re going to pretend to be engaged.”

“If you think you’re going to change me, you’ll be doomed to disappointment. Is that a yes?”

“You can be a real jerk.” She sighs. “Fine. I’m saying yes. You can be my fake fiancé until my brother comes to his senses.”

The triumph spiking through me is almost sexual. I smile. “Perfect. What do you need from your hotel room for the night—clothes, toiletries, medicines?”

“My nightgown and skin care.”

Fine, but if I have my way, she won’t be wearing the nightgown for long.

I send a text to my assistant. Lisa will have to be in on the ruse, too, or it will never work. She texts back immediately that she’ll collect Corinne’s things. Another reason I value my assistant. She doesn’t bother me with small problems, like how to get into someone else’s hotel room; she just handles them.

“Everything will be delivered in the next hour.”

Corinne pauses. “Just like that?”

“Just like that. Are you on the pill?”

“Why would I be? I’ve never had sex.”

“There are other medical reasons to take it.”

“To regulate periods. I tried once. My system couldn’t tolerate the hormones.”

So if I don’t want her pregnant, I have to be careful. “Good to know.”

Dessert arrives, along with steaming hot coffee. Ailani sets the bill at my elbow. “No rush.”

Actually, there is. Corinne said yes. We need to get started on my revenge. And if tonight goes as desired, I’ll have her naked and under me, too.

I snap a credit card onto the leather sleeve without even glancing at the total and hand it back to Ailani. “We need to go. Can you wrap up the hula pie and take care of this?”

She nods. “Right away.”

When our waitress disappears again, Corinne frowns. “What are you doing?”

“Taking you home and stripping you down.” Might as well be honest.

“You agreed to no sex for a few days.”

“I won’t fuck you.” Unless she says yes. “But you agreed to let me touch you. That’s what I’m going to do.”

Ailani returns, quickly shuttles our giant slice of ice cream pie into a to-go container, then puts it in a bag with some dry ice. “Will there be anything else?”

I leave her a healthy tip and sign the slip. “Ten minutes of privacy. Then we’ll be leaving. Would you let Duke know I’d like to speak to him on our way out?”

“Of course. I’ll leave your dessert up front with the hostess. Thank you for dining with us this evening. It was a pleasure.”

As she slips out of the room, hula pie in hand, I smile. Now, the real pleasure is about to start.

Slowly, I lift my napkin from my lap, set it on the table, rise to my feet, and head straight for Corinne.

“What are you doing?” she asks, wide-eyed.

“What does it look like?” I stop at her side, then kneel beside her and take her hand. “I’m putting a ring on your finger, princess.”

“Give it to me. I-I can slip it on.”

Not on your life. “Let me.”

Before she can object again, I fish the ring out of my pocket and slide it down her slender finger. It fits like it was made for her. The symbolism of me settling that sparkling band in place fucks with my head. It’s too easy to imagine that she’s actually mine...

I meet Corinne’s stare. Her eyes are even wider. She pulls away too fast.

“There.” I clear my throat as I stand and help her to her feet. “We’re engaged. Congratulations.”

She swallows nervously. “Are we leaving now?”

“Not quite yet. First, I think I should kiss my bride.”

chapter FIVE

*K*iss is an understatement. I'm playing to win.

Excitement tightens my gut. By the time we leave here, Corinne will look rosy and sated. And every one of those prying bastards in the dining room paying more attention to us than their meal will notice. Through their online pictures and words, they'll tell Parker, too.

I don't have to utter a single word.

But that's not the reason I'm excited.

I'm finally getting my hands on Corinne. I've thought of almost nothing else since we met. I should be obsessed about my clients' portfolios and the shit this ridiculous, overindulgent movie is making of my reputation. Instead, I'm fixated on her.

Maxon warned me about the Reed proclivities. The genetic gift of making money apparently comes with the curse of thinking with our genitals. I can't get cocky or sloppy. I can't lose sight of my goals.

"Here? Now?" she asks breathlessly.

I cup her face and stare into her dark, expressive eyes, soft below the sexy arches of her brows. Her luscious mouth grabs my attention as if she tugged on my cock. I'm dying to press her against the wall and fuck her, but that's my impatience. The head still thinking rationally remembers my plans.

"It's just a kiss, princess."

"Why not wait until we're someplace less public?"

"Because we have to pose for the cameras on our way out. If you push back on the PDA in front of those people..." I let her draw the obvious conclusion.

"Everyone will know the truth."

“Exactly. So let’s get you comfortable with having me all over you while we’re alone.”

She swallows. “You’re right.”

My heart trips into a gallop as I bend to Corinne and touch my lips to hers. The first contact is a full-body jolt of electricity. Stunned, I jerk back and gaze down at her. She’s waiting with breath held and lips pursed, so fucking beautiful I can’t resist tunneling my hands into her hair and kissing her again.

I brush over her softness, back and forth. Her breathing turns choppy as I claim her mouth, luring, coaxing, teasing. Then impatience urges me to nudge her lips apart and glide deep, stroking her shy tongue. She melts and molds against me with a hum of arousal. Desire ratchets up. The taste of wine on her lips is sweet, but it’s her reaction—her indrawn breath, the way she seizes up as if she’s shocked that she likes my kiss, followed by her unsteady exhalation—that intoxicates me.

With a low moan, I pull her flush against my body and deepen the kiss. Corinne offers zero protest, clinging to my shoulders and rising up on her tiptoes to get closer.

Fuck, she doesn’t just taste good; she smells incredible. That something I caught a tantalizing whiff of yesterday when we met fills my nose. The scent is so lushly feminine. Not too floral, not too musky. Whatever that is, I want it for myself. I want to own it, bottle it. I want it swimming in my head as I bare her virgin body for my pleasure. I want it dripping off my skin when I’m between her legs, driving deep, and making her cry out my name.

Gripping the back of her dress with one hand, I slide the other down her body and cup her ass to fit the dizzying heat of her pussy against my cock. Her groan fills the air, impatient and needy.

Suddenly, she wrenches free, panting. “I think we’re good with kissing now.”

I shake my head. “You’re not comfortable yet.”

“That’s more kiss than I’ve ever—” She stops and shakes her head. “I mean, more than I expected.”

So Riley never kissed her like he’d goddamn die if he didn’t have his lips on hers? It figures since he also never managed to find his dick around her. “Tip of the iceberg, princess. I’m going to do that to you every chance I get.”

“It’s not necessary. I’ve seen pictures of you with other women online. They don’t look overheated and flushed, and no one questioned whether you actually had sex with them.”

“I wasn’t engaged to any of them. You have to look in love and well sated. If you don’t, there will be doubt.”

“You just want me to give in and have sex with you.”

“Fuck yes, I do. But that’s not the reason I’m kissing you. You want this ploy to succeed? Focus. People can spot a fraud.”

She hesitates. “At least give me a minute to catch my breath. I’m just... It was unexpected. I didn’t think you would kiss me so...passionately.”

Hasn’t Corinne been listening to how much I want her? Or did she not believe me? “I’m very passionate. Let’s get you there, too.”

I capture her mouth again, this time diving straight into her hottest depths to caress her tongue and claim every part of her she’ll give me. I half expect resistance, but she slowly loops her arms around my neck, tilting her head to take me deeper.

Son of a bitch, I’ve done nothing more than kiss Corinne. We’re fully clothed. I’ve never seen her naked. And already, this is way hotter than the last five times I got laid. I don’t know what it is about her... The fact she’s Parker’s sister? Is it her innocence? Her beauty? The intrepid way she’s determined to save her business, regardless of the obstacles in her path? Whatever it is, she sparks everything inside me to burning life, including a possessive urge I didn’t expect.

Again, she pulls free with flushed cheeks and uneven breaths. The way she bites that already swollen bottom lip kicks up my lust.

“Has any man ever made you come?” I need to know.

“That’s none of your business.”

“It is now.” I grab her chin. I’m gentle but firm as I force her to look at me. “Yes or no?”

“That’s too personal.”

“The way I’m kissing you is pretty personal. So is the way I’m going to fuck you. Tell me. I have to know how slow to take this.”

“Never,” she finally admits.

That shouldn’t thrill me, but I get a sick triumph from knowing I’ll be the first man she’ll surrender herself to, the first to give her ecstasy, the first to hear her cry out in strangled pleasure when I send her to the ultimate peak.

And that excitement has nothing to do with Parker. The truth is, I want Corinne in a way that makes me feel out of control. It’s dangerous and self-destructive. I’m not thinking straight.

Right now, I don’t care.

“Let’s fix that.”

She gapes at me. “Here?”

I just smile and press her back against the table, taking control of her mouth while I urge her pretty ass onto the flat surface. Wedging myself between her thighs, I tug on her hair until she offers me her throat with a gasp. My body buzzes as I lick my way up her neck, over her thready pulse point, then settle my lips over hers. I love getting her tongue against mine. I need her body melding to my own... Jesus, I feel like a parched man slowly dying of thirst and she’s the only oasis that can save me.

Peeling my fingers from her hip, I send my free hand drifting up her torso, to settle around her ribs. Then I swipe a slow, sensual thumb over her nipple. She tenses, then warbles out a shaky sound of desire.

“Hearing you gets me hot,” I mutter in her ear. “You going to make more noise for me, princess?”

A little whine escapes her parted lips. I’m not sure if that’s a yes or no. Her only other response is to close her eyes, her lashes fluttering against her rosy cheeks, while I cradle her breast in my hand.

What I don’t hear is a protest. So I keep going.

“Yes, just like that,” I encourage softly. “I’ve imagined you naked for me, so pretty and needy, pink and writhing, legs spread as you beg me. Will you tease me about my humility then?”

“Yes,” she breathes as she lays her lips on my neck and kisses her way up. “Always.”

I would laugh if I wasn’t so busy shuddering under the soft drag of her mouth against my skin. Every breath I take is infused with her scent, strong in the crook of her neck, where I can’t resist sampling her with my tongue. As I pinch her nipple through her dress, I trail my lips over her graceful shoulders, skim her collarbones, then taste her flesh down to the top of her strapless dress.

The soft material is in my way.

I walk my fingers along her back and slowly lower her zipper.

“Xavian...” Her breathy voice doesn’t tell me whether she’s objecting or pleading.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“I should.”

“But do you?”

Corinne grips the front of my coat. “No. Kiss me.”

Desperately, I slant my mouth over hers and yank on her zipper. She gasps as I tug down her dress. Her breasts pop free. And I gape.

She’s got a perfect pair—round, pert, and topped with dusky nipples that make me groan out loud as I nudge her onto

her back. “Princess...”

Her eyes widen. “What are you doing?”

“Getting my mouth on you.” I nuzzle my way up the valley between her breasts, drowning in her pooling scent.

“But we’re not”—she struggles for breaths and thoughts—“alone.”

“The doors are closed. No one will interrupt us for the next seven minutes. Let’s see how good I can make you feel,” I murmur against her nipple before I suck it into my mouth and take a long pull.

Her eyes widen. Her spine arches off the table. Her head slides back with a moan.

“Xavian...”

I’m too busy dragging my tongue over the taut tip and absorbing her delicious shiver to answer. Instead, I shift my focus to her other breast, its peak stabbing the air in a silent cry for attention. I wrap my lips around it and tug, skimming my fingers under her dress and up her thigh, until I’m teasing the lacy edge of her panties.

I press my thumb over the gusset and groan.

She’s soaked.

“You shouldn’t...” She squirms. “Not here.”

Does Corinne think I’m going to relegate touching her strictly to the bedroom?

“Right here,” I insist against her rigid nipple. “You’re going to come for me.”

Her breathing picks up pace. “But—”

“Your body is safe, princess.” No one will see what’s mine.

Slowly, she melts back into the table, biting her lip. “My heart is racing.”

“You afraid?”

“I should be.” Slowly, she opens her eyes and meets my stare. “But I’m not.”

“Good. Let’s get rid of these.” I tug her panties down her legs and stuff them in my pocket.

“Give those back!” She tries to sit up.

“No.” I urge her down again and kiss up from her breast to her lobe. “I want your pussy bare and waiting for me.”

A shocked little sound escapes her throat. Fuck, this is hot, especially when her hips wriggle in silent pleading under her chic, oh-so-demure dress.

Gently, I suck one of her nipples between my teeth. She gasps and twists, clutching my arms like I’m her only grip on sanity. I slide my hand over her mound and groan. Goddamn, she’s hot. Swollen. Slick as hell. Next time, I’ll get my stare on that pussy. My mouth, too. I’ll make her scream.

For now, I run my fingers through the slick valley and settle them over her hard clit. She lets out a shocked breath. I smile. I’m just getting warmed up...

As I slowly circle her nub, her hold on me tightens. Her eyes widen with something near panic. Her hips dance in a rhythm that begs for satisfaction.

This won’t take long.

“Xavian!” she keens out.

“That feels good, princess. Doesn’t it?”

“So good. Oh...” she pants. “So...oh, my gosh.”

Fuck, her arousal is contagious. Our stares fuse. A moan slips from her pouty lips. And all I can think about is having her naked in my bed so I can spend all night finding every way possible to make her come.

She’s close now. Her thighs tremble. A flush blooms across her chest. Her breasts rise and shake with each sharp inhalation. She’s so damn beautiful. I want to spend a year corrupting her. No, a decade. Fuck that, a century.

I pinch her clit. Her cries turn louder. Her whole body jolts. Her flesh turns steely between my fingers.

Watching her desperately seek the orgasm I'm about to give her is fucking intoxicating...

"Oh. Oh!" Her eyes slide shut. "Oh my—"

"Eyes open. Look at me." When she goes over, I want her to know exactly who's heaping ecstasy on her.

Her lashes flutter up, leaving helpless, dilated eyes focused on me as if I'm her entire universe. "I'm going to..."

"Come?"

"I can't stop it."

"Don't. Give it to me."

She bites her lip as if she's trying to stay quiet, but she pants once, twice... Suddenly, her body jolts and bucks. She lets out an urgent wail that surely resonates through the adjacent kitchen and drifts to the dining room. That should probably make me happy. But I'm focused solely on Corinne, especially when the last of her feral cry ekes from her fuckable mouth just before she wilts back to the table.

Holy shit, that was hot. How the hell am I going to make it home without every single person in that packed restaurant seeing how hard I am? And what will I do when I get her home? I promised I'd give her a couple of days before we have sex.

I'll die. My brain won't survive because all my blood is trapped in my cock.

Finally, Corinne catches her breath and blinks up at me, stunned. If that's all it takes to make her speechless, spending time with her and convincing Parker we're in love will be the time of my life.

But now I need to show her off, while she's flushed and disheveled. Reluctantly, I help her to her feet and flip her around, nuzzling her neck as I zip up her dress. "Let's go."

She shudders, legs wobbling, as she braces on the table. “I-I need a minute to fix my hair and lipstick and—”

“That doesn’t work for our plan, princess.” I spin her to face me and offer her my right arm. “Hold on to me.”

Corinne bites her lip. “Everyone out there will know what we just did.”

“Yep.”

She closes her eyes. “It’s embarrassing.”

“It’s perfect. All those people will see that you’re satisfied. The story will get back to your brother, too. Now take my arm.” I hold it out until her fingers curl around my gray coat—a stark contrast to her pale hand and the glittering diamond on her ring finger. “Let’s give the folks a show.”



Slowly, I slide the doors to the dining room open. Everyone turns and stares. Beside me, Corinne clutches my arm.

People reach for their phones.

Smiling smugly, I make a spectacle of wiping her lipstick from my mouth before burrowing my face in her neck. “Look happy.”

Her lips curl up into something loopy and lopsided. “Like this?”

“Perfect.” I lead her forward, dropping a kiss on her exposed shoulder. “A lot of cameras capturing the moment...”

“They aren’t even trying to be discreet.”

“No. After tonight you’ll be infamous, too.”

“I already feel that way,” she groans.

“We’re just getting started.”

I lead her down the steps and through the dining room. Every gaze is glued to us, even the waitstaff’s. When the path

between chairs narrows, I urge Corinne ahead of me, planting my hands possessively at the small of her back.

“Press your left hand to your chest like the evening has been overwhelming,” I murmur in her ear.

She complies. “It has.”

More people snap pictures. I can’t resist laying another kiss on her bare shoulder.

She shudders. “You have to stop doing that.”

“Why?” The path to the front of the restaurant widens again and I wrap my arm around her.

She blinks up at me. Her eyes are still dark with passion, her lips swollen from my kiss. “I’m shaky. Every time you touch me only makes it worse.”

The feeling is mutual. “I can’t wait to have you all to myself again.”

“Xavian...”

She’s going to remind me that none of this is real. Logically, she’s right, but if we’re both feeling it, is it really still a lie?

Dangerous thinking. I need to stay on plan.

I lift her left hand from her chest and kiss her palm, making her shiver again. “Don’t worry. The photo op is almost over, princess. Just one more conversation, then we can leave.”

“Good. All I can think about is how wet and naked I am under this dress.” She shifts uncomfortably.

I grin. “That’s consuming my thoughts, too.”

Before she can rebuke me, we reach the foyer and Duke appears. “I hope you enjoyed your dinner.”

“The best I’ve had in a long time.” I let the innuendo linger as I skim my fingers up and down Corinne’s hip. It’s a delicious reminder that her panties are in my pocket.

“Excellent. And you?” Duke turns to Corinne, undressing her with his stare for a split second before his practiced smile shifts back into place.

I restrain the urge to punch him for daring to eye-fuck what’s mine. But she isn’t. We have a mutual purpose, and for that I’ll get the pleasure of having her in my bed. But she’ll never belong to me.

I shelve the annoying thought.

“It was wonderful,” she breathes.

“I’d be hard-pressed to say whether my fiancée or I enjoyed it more. Ms. Emerson and I just got engaged.”

“Congratulations,” Duke offers smoothly.

“Thank you.” She smiles, flashing her ring.

“I’ll send you home with a bottle of champagne to celebrate. If you’ll give me a moment, I’ll grab it and your dessert so you can be on your way.”

“Thank you.”

Once he’s gone, I cup her shoulders and tip her chin up to me. “You’re doing great.”

“How long do you think it will be before Parker sees pictures of the engagement ring?”

“My guess? He already has. Any regrets?”

She shakes her head.

People are still watching, so I swoop down and kiss Corinne breathless for the cameras, crushing her lush mouth under mine. I’m sure more pictures are being snapped...but I don’t care. I’m fixated on tasting her sweet lips.

A nibble isn’t enough. I latch my hand around her slender neck and tilt her head to take me deeper. She clutches my shoulders and presses her body to mine. Her touch travels through every part of me like a live wire.

I’m contemplating which nearby wall I can press her against and work my hand under her dress to pet her bare

pussy when someone clears his throat.

With a growl, I lift my head.

“Your dessert.” Duke hands the bag packed with dry ice to Corinne, then gives me a chilled bottle. “And your champagne. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

When the restaurant owner pivots away, my sanity returns. “One more thing.”

He faces us again. “Yes?”

“Princess, get the valet to bring my car around.” I hand her the ticket. “I’ll be right there.”

Corinne looks confused, her stare bouncing back and forth between Duke and me, but she nods. “All right.”

A hostess opens the door for her and the Hawaiian evening swallows Corinne up. She’ll start getting recognized in public soon, so I don’t dare leave her alone for long.

I turn back to Duke. “Do you keep surveillance footage of that private room?”

“We have to. Video only, no audio. But we’ve hosted corporate parties where drunk executives get handsy with the waitstaff—”

“Understood. But this was my fiancée and me...spending time together.” This footage being leaked would bolster our story, but it would also embarrass Corinne. I’d like to spare her that.

Duke’s plastic smile returns. “Naturally, I’ll make sure your privacy is protected.”

“Send me that footage and delete your copy.” I don’t want it in his spank bank, either. I reach in my pocket and peel off a few hundred dollars. “For your trouble.”

He shakes his head. “Nothing that camera captured is worth ruining my business. Tell me where to send it. I’ll purge mine immediately. You have my word.”

That’s the best I can do. I tuck my cash away and hand him my business card. “I appreciate your discretion.”

And if Duke doesn't follow through, I'll come down on him like a house of bricks.

"Of course. You'll have it in your inbox before you reach home."

"Thank you." I make my way outside where Corinne is thankfully standing alone as the valet pulls up with my car.

"What was that about?" she asks. "Everything all right?"

We're no longer on display, but that doesn't stop me from taking her hand after I tip the guy and help her into the passenger's seat. "Just buttoning up some details. We're good."

"Tonight went well, right?"

"It couldn't have gone better." I mean that.

As I toss myself behind the wheel and take off, I try to focus on our next steps, on managing the narrative. If I don't get in front of the messaging, Parker will—and we'll have an uphill battle. But all I can think about is whether Corinne will let me give her another orgasm tonight.

She sighs in relief. "Thank goodness it's over now. All those people staring was nerve-racking."

"You can relax."

"Now that no one is gawking at us, yes." She smiles—until her phone, tucked in her small purse, buzzes.

"You going to answer that?"

Corinne shakes her head. "It's either Parker or my bestie, Ash. I don't want to listen to my brother rail; he can wait until I'm ready to talk."

"And Ash?" I think I remember her name when I skimmed Owen's report.

"She's probably calling to ask if I've lost my mind. She knows when I'm dating someone, so she's fully aware that I barely know you. I'd rather not lie to her."

"Is she tight with your brother?"

She scoffs. “Ash thinks he has a stick up his behind. She’d gleefully shove it deeper if it didn’t mean touching him.”

“I like her already.”

“We’re total opposites.” Corinne grins fondly. “Her favorite words all start with F. She tells me constantly that I’m too polite and that I try too hard to make everyone happy. I hate fighting, and I usually give in to cut down on strife.”

“And that’s not Ash?”

Corinne shakes her head. “A lot of people—especially men—consider her a ball-busting something that rhymes with itch. But she has a sweet side...once you dig for it.”

I’ve dated a few like her. I usually enjoy sparring with them. But my “fiancée,” now nervously smoothing her dress over her thighs, is making me work for it in a different way. Bashfulness isn’t something I’ve been attracted to in the past, but I’m fascinated now. What would it take to make her throw caution to the wind and give herself to me, body and soul?

“What about you? I don’t know much, other than what you’ve told me.” That’s not strictly true, but close enough.

She nods. “I don’t know a lot about you, either.”

“That won’t fly at our engagement party.”

“You’re right. But we can’t use sex to ‘learn’ each other.”

“No.” I turn to her through the shadowy car. “You enjoyed the orgasm I gave you, though. Admit it.”

“It was good.” She shrugs. “I’ve given myself better.”

Is that the new bar I have to hurdle to impress her? No problem. “Then I’ll try harder.”

She freezes. “Wait. I-I wasn’t challenging you.”

I just smile. Even if she didn’t mean to, I’m determined to dazzle her in the future.

At a stoplight, I check my emails. Duke’s pops in with a large attachment that must be the surveillance footage. Lisa texts to inform me that she just dropped off everything from

Corinne's hotel. She put the suitcase in my bedroom and the case of beads and craft items in a spare.

Perfect.

I darken my phone and pocket it as the light turns green. "Since we have to get to know each other before tomorrow, we should start exchanging information. What do you drive?"

"That's your first question, my car?"

I shrug. "It just came to mind."

"My brother's hand-me-down."

"That old red Honda?"

"You know it?"

"Hell, yes. We had more than a few four a.m. runs for food in that piece of shit."

"After a lot of alcohol?"

I don't think of Parker fondly anymore, but the memories...yeah. "Those were good times."

"Is that why my car still smells faintly like vomit on a really hot day?" She slants an unhappy glare at me.

"I plead the Fifth." I grin.

"I'm not surprised."

"Where were you born?" I ask.

"Greenwich, Connecticut."

"Close to your grandparents' place?"

She nods. "Just a few miles away. What about you?"

"LA. Until I moved to Maui, I'd never traveled much farther than from one end of the Valley to the other. What's your favorite color? Mine is gray."

"That's not a color. It's a shade."

I scowl. "What's the difference?"

She sighs like I'm hopeless. "I expected you to say blue or green..."

“Because that’s common? Are you going to tell me yours is pink?”

“Raspberry,” she corrects.

“*That’s* not a color.”

“It is. It’s a dark, vibrant reddish-pink,” she defends.

“But still pink.” I laugh. “When is your birthday? Sometime in June, right?”

She nods. “The thirtieth. And yours is...in the fall? I remember Parker throwing you a party once upon a time.”

“My twenty-first.” That was a bender I barely recall. “I was born November eighth. Um...favorite movie?”

“That’s an impossible question to answer. It depends on my mood.”

“What? There’s only one favorite movie. That’s why it’s your favorite.”

“You only have one? Really?”

“Yes. It’s always *Fight Club*.”

She wrinkles her nose, looking adorable. “I’m more of a *Pride and Prejudice* girl.”

“You would love my buddy’s wife, Echo.” I roll my eyes in teasing fun. “She always picks the romantic flicks. Give me action—of all kinds. Favorite pie? I’m a sucker for blackberry.”

“I wouldn’t turn that down, but peach with cinnamon ice cream...” She sighs like her love is almost sexual.

“If you’ll make those sounds, I’ll get you all the peach pie with cinnamon ice cream you could want.”

“Stop it. I’m already embarrassed that I moan. Next question,” she prompts...but I see a smile playing at her lips.

“Ever broken a bone?”

“No. You?”

I snort. “Both legs. My right arm—twice. My collarbone, most of my fingers, a toe or two... I could go on.”

“You were one of those rambunctious boys, weren’t you? Climbing trees and riding bikes down flights of stairs?”

“Yeah. When I was a kid, my mom’s coworkers had a bet about whether I’d celebrate my tenth birthday in a cast. For the record, I did.”

She shakes her head. “I’ll bet you were a handful.”

Since she left me such a wide-open verbal path, I can’t resist. “I’m more than a handful now, if you want to reach over and feel.”

“We’re supposed to get to know each other. I didn’t mean using our hands.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” I pull up to my house and slide the car into my garage, then turn to her. “Here we are.”

Corinne sends me a nervous smile, then reaches for her door handle. I leap out and run around to offer her a hand out. She looks at my outstretched palm, then up at my face, before settling her fingers on mine.

“Watch your step. I keep a bunch of weights and sporting equipment here.” I close the car door behind her and guide her to the house.

When I reach the shadowy kitchen, I flip on a few lights, brightening up the place. “Home sweet home. While you’re here, help yourself to whatever you want.”

She scans the room with wide eyes, taking in the dark cabinets, white quartz counters, and European appliances I’ve rarely used. The area spills over into the living area with its cushy gray sectional, swaying ceiling fan, and the giant big-screen. Her face doesn’t tell me what she’s thinking. I’ve never cared about anyone’s opinion. Then again, I’ve never brought a woman back to my house.

“Thanks. I wouldn’t mind a bottle of water while I change clothes.”

“Sure.” I grab one from the fridge. “Follow me. I’ll show you where Lisa put your things.”

I brace for fireworks as I lead her to my bedroom and flip on a light. Her yellow suitcase sits beside my bed, looking bright against my black duvet.

She takes in the room. “I’m not sleeping in here with you.”

“It wasn’t something I planned, but it’s the best way to get used to me.”

“We have time—”

“Less than twenty-four hours before our engagement party. I won’t do more than kiss you, but we have to be prepared.”

She toys with the engagement ring I slid on her finger. “I don’t like feeling pressured.”

“Under any other circumstance, I would respect your personal space. But you came to me—”

“You don’t have to remind me.”

Clearly, I do. “And I said yes. We both have reasons. Unless you have some other way of getting your hands on the money you need?”

Corinne sighs. “You know I don’t.”

“Then this is for the best.”

“Where’s the rest of my stuff? I have work to do and you promised me space.”

“Other side of the house, the east-facing office. It’s all yours. Let me know if you need anything.”

She snatches the water bottle from my hand, grabs her suitcase, then nods toward the half-open door on the far side of the room. “I assume that’s your bathroom?”

I nod. “Help yourself.”

She shuts the door behind her. I stalk into my walk-in closet, tearing off my coat with a curse. I’m frustrated. The more time I spend with Corinne, the more I like her. The more

time she spends with me, the more she's convinced I'm an asshole.

She's probably not wrong...

After I hang up my suit and tuck her underwear into my nightstand, I don a pair of basketball shorts and a tank. I hear the soft click of the door and see her emerge with her dark hair swirled on top of her head in a messy bun, wearing a rose-colored T-shirt with cropped pants in a soft floral print. Her bare feet with pink polish are adorable.

“This is a lot less sexy, I know.”

Every part of me disagrees, especially my cock. Thank god my tank is long enough to cover my reaction. “Perfect for eating Hula Pie and playing twenty questions.”

She sips some water. “Let's get this done.”

I take her hand instead, mostly because I hate not touching her, and usher her back to the kitchen. “Coffee? Champagne?”

She holds up her water. “This is good.”

“Have a seat. I'll be right back.” I pad out to the garage and grab our dessert and the bubbly, which I tuck into the fridge. Then I swipe two spoons before I follow her to the couch and sit beside her, lifting the lid on our dessert. “Where were we?”

“Um, you'd broken half the bones in your body.”

“Probably. Take a bite.”

“I'm going to moan.”

I smile. “I'm counting on it.”

Corinne glares as she dips her spoon into the decadent ice cream confection and lifts it to her mouth. Her eyes go wide and she lets out a low, pleasure-filled groan. “That's amazing.”

“See, I wouldn't steer you wrong.”

“I'm not convinced of that.”

“You're a suspicious little thing.”

“I’m not little. I definitely weigh more than I should, so you have to stop feeding me this stuff,” she says as she slides another spoonful into her mouth.

Her ensuing groan is another kick to my libido.

“You’re little to me, and if you make one more comment about your weight, I’m going to do unspeakably dirty, filthy things to your body to prove just how beautiful you are.”

She stifles a laugh. “That only proves you like sex, which everyone knows.”

“But you’re sexy as hell, and you should know it.” I shovel a bite of the pie into my mouth. It’s good. Really good. I’d still rather have her tits on my tongue. And...there goes my raging erection again. It’s going to be a long night. “You’re too worried about your weight. Why don’t you have more confidence?”

She frowns. “I haven’t exactly been a man magnet.”

Is she crazy? “At the hotel bar the other night, you could have had three takers.”

“No. The bartender flirted with me for a better tip.”

“Bullshit.” I know the difference.

“The married guy next to me just asked what time it was.”

“Guys with no game ask questions like that so they can talk to you.”

“You have an active imagination.” She rolls her eyes. “I have no idea who the third guy was.”

“In the corner with the rowdy crowd. I gave him the I’ll-fuck-you-up glare and he backed off.”

“You did not.”

“Oh, I did.” This back-and-forth isn’t telling me what I want to know. “What did Riley do to you?”

“W-what do you mean? He didn’t do anything.”

That’s a lie. “Did he tell you you’re overweight?”

“No, but I have a mirror.” She spoons up more of the pie. “And I know I shouldn’t be eating this.”

“You think weight is why he broke up with you?” That would make him a shallow prick.

“I don’t know. He just...abruptly called it quits. Before that, I would have sworn he intended to...” She bites her lip.

“Propose?”

“Clearly, I was delusional. And if he never loved me, I’m better off without him.”

There are so many things I could say, mostly that he wasn’t worth her time. Instead, I take her hand. “It’s hard when you think your future is set, right? I thought Hadley was the one.” I laugh at myself. “What the hell did I know? I was twenty-one. My biggest worry then was my midterms. I hardly thought beyond the next party. Hadley was good in bed. I didn’t know what love was.”

“Do you now?” she asks softly.

“Firsthand? No. But I see all my siblings with their spouses. At least I know what love is supposed to look like.”

“My parents were really in love. I remember that. Our house was happy. There was laughter. Even my brother was decent to be around then.”

“How old were you?”

“When they died? Almost eight. They left for a weekend to celebrate their anniversary and...” She shakes her head, her eyes tearing up. “Sorry, this shouldn’t be hard all these years later.”

“Yeah, it should. I still can’t think about losing my mom without getting choked up. What happened after they were gone? Your grandparents took you in, right?”

She nods. “All the friends I had been looking forward to seeing when school started... I never saw them again. After my grandparents moved us in to their house, my grandmother decided that my mother had raised me too ‘bohemian.’ She thought I would benefit from boarding school. Parker, of

course, got to stay home. He was just starting high school and he'd made the basketball team. That was somehow more important than my activities."

"That doesn't sound fair."

"I got used to it. He was always the favorite. And nothing I ever did was good enough."

She interpreted Riley's breakup the same way. She hadn't been pretty enough or skinny enough or whatever enough to suit him. Her grandparents have passed now, so there's no telling them how she feels. But if she ever sees that asshole ex of hers again, I hope she slaps him in the face and tells him that she's amazing, no matter what he thinks.

Better yet, I'll tell him.

No, it won't be my problem because I won't be with Corinne. We're here to hoodwink her brother. Once she has her money and I have my revenge, she'll be gone.

"Wow, that went dark fast," she quips, shoving the rest of the pie in my direction. "Sorry."

It's only half gone, but I've lost interest, too. "You are good enough. Don't ever let anyone tell you different."

She sends me a sad little smile that makes me want to put my arms around her and hold her. Of course, if she wanted to get naked, I'd be game, but...

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"It couldn't have been easy, knowing your dad walked away before you were born."

I have a flippant answer for this question, but she's been pretty honest. "Growing up, I didn't understand why all the other kids had super-involved dads. I wondered what was wrong with me. I know now that Barclay had a wife and a whole other family. Don't get me wrong. Some of the other dads were great and taught me a lot. But yeah, not having or knowing my father was a wound. But eventually, I learned to manage without him."

“And you always had your mom?”

“Always. She was everything. I wish you could have met her. She would have loved you.” The words slip out before I can reel them back.

“Yeah?” She laughs. “My parents would have hated you. I mean, since you want to get into my panties.”

“Did you put some on again?”

“That’s none of your business.”

I want to make it my business. For now, I smile. “If it’s any consolation, I like you for more than what’s in your panties.”

“I’m a little shocked, but I don’t hate you, either.”

That makes me laugh. “Good to hear.”

Corinne takes a sip from her water bottle, then thoughtfully re-caps it. “Was I right earlier? Is Hadley the reason you sleep with a lot of women but never let any close?”

Probably. Yeah. But I shrug. “Maybe I just never met the right one.”

“How hard have you tried?”

“I’ve met tons of women.”

She tsks at me. “I didn’t ask how many you’ve taken to bed. How many have you bothered to get to know?”

None. “I’m fine with the way things are now.”

“So what will you tell the people who know you well about us? How will you convince them our engagement is real?”

I don’t have a good answer for that yet. “Don’t worry. It will work out. I won’t let you down.”

“Yesterday, I wouldn’t have believed you. But now, I think you really mean that.”

“Of course. We’re in this together.”

She nods. “I want you to know that if Hadley ever made you feel like you weren’t good enough, you should take your own advice. You are. Don’t let anyone make you feel any different.”

chapter SIX

Corinne's words still rattle around my head an hour later. Since she retreated to my giant walk-in shower, I use the opportunity to grab her underwear in my fist, slip into my office, and stash them in my desk drawer. Yes, it's perverse. And no, I'm not giving them back. But I can't fixate yet.

Corinne and I will hopefully be having an engagement party at Maxon and Keeley's place in roughly sixteen hours. I need to start making phone calls, starting with them, and laying the groundwork for a smooth event.

Three of my eighty-plus missed calls are from my oldest brother. I know it's late, but he's obviously seen social media and wants to know what the hell I'm doing. If we're going to be partners, despite the temporary setback, he deserves an answer.

He picks up my call immediately. "What the fuck? I know you want to get back at Parker, but last I heard you were thinking about investing in his sister's company. Now you two are *engaged*? Those after-dinner pictures are all over social media. Did you two fuck your way through dinner?"

"No." But we came close.

"It looks that way. I'll bet Parker thinks so, too. Was this feud not ugly enough for you?"

I grimace. "The situation is complicated."

"How is it the kind of 'complicated' that requires you to put a ring on that girl's finger and flash her to the world? How does that do anything but add fuel to the fire?"

Briefly, I explain the scheme Corinne and I cooked up, minus the sex. Maxon listens, only swearing occasionally.

"That's pretty much it," I finally say.

"You're crazy. You know that, right?"

What seemed logical and even deliciously subversive mere hours ago now feels problematic. I'm worried there's a pitfall—some cliff I'm about to fall from—that I can't see. "You got a better solution?"

"No. Your plan is completely underhanded, which makes it exactly what a Reed would do."

"So you're on board? You'll help me?"

Maxon sighs. "I'll probably regret this, but yeah."

Thank fuck. "Then I need a favor."

"You want us to host your engagement party, right?" Maxon doesn't sound happy.

"I know it's last-minute and that I'm asking a lot. I'll pay you—"

"It's not about the money. If you were really in love with this woman and getting married for the right reasons, I'd happily toss you a big-ass bash."

A part of me wishes I was, but despite her kind words, Corinne isn't into me for me. Sure, she responded to my fingers on her clit, but most any halfway knowledgeable guy could get her off. She's really here because I can give her the help she needs. That's all. I can't read more into her responses than that.

"Since you're not"—Maxon goes on—"you're responsible for cleanup after the party."

"No problem. Thanks for helping me out. If it's any consolation, you're helping her, too."

"The reason I'm agreeing to this shit show is because we're family. Plus, if Corinne gets things squared with her brother and the blowback from the movie dies down, we can get back to business."

"I've got the cash set aside so when it's time to fund our venture, we'll be good to go."

"We're done with everything else, so that's the next and final step before we announce it to the world."

I'm looking forward to diversifying from straight portfolio management to true wealth building. Property and real estate value has its ups and downs, but it always has intrinsic worth. Time to offer that dependability to my clients. I had to scrimp and save for a couple of years to be ready for this step, but we're almost there... "It's going to be great."

"It should be. Just...don't fuck up." He sighs. "Keeley and I will serve cocktails and heavy hors d'oeuvres at six. We'll invite the right people. Let me know if there's anyone Corinne wants to attend. You two come prepared to look wildly in love."

We have to keep working on that. "Thanks. What are you going to tell your wife?"

"Nothing more than she already knows. If Keeley understood the whole scheme, she would only scold you. Besides, it doesn't affect her much, except to give the B and B good PR. But it impacts business, so I have to tell Griff. Plus, he and I didn't talk for three years because of a supposed secret, so we agreed never to have any between us again."

They wouldn't be speaking now—or have a thriving real estate business—if they hadn't sworn to be honest. "I get it. I just hate lying to the rest of the family."

"But telling them serves no purpose except to put your plan at risk. When it's over, spill whatever you like. Until then, the fewer people who know, the better."

He's right, except... "What about Bethany?" Technically, I still work for her. "I can't even give the appearance of dishonesty, especially after what she went through with Barclay."

"She's already seen the pictures of you and Corinne together." Despite that, Maxon's tone tells me he's plotting. "But if you're putting off the announcement of your partnership until this shit dies down, then everything is just business as usual. So if you tell Bethany when she's recovering from childbirth and barely sleeping, it's just more crap on her plate she doesn't need."

Clint will be pissed when he finds out, and I'm concerned about breaking the trust between Bethany and me. I'm risking a lot for revenge...

Are you really just after revenge anymore?

I stifle that question. "I don't love it, but all right. When this is over, I'll make it up to her."

"Hell, if you come out of this with a better image—totally doable, in my estimation—this ploy would be a net positive she'll congratulate you for. Our sister might be pretty and soft-spoken, but she can absolutely swim with the sharks."

I know she can. I've seen it firsthand. "Good point. I owe you—big."

"You're fucking right, you do. Make sure this doesn't blow up in your face."

"I will. Thanks."

"No thanks necessary. Family is supposed to have each other's backs, remember?"

"I don't have as much practice as you with that, but yeah. And I'm here for you."

"Good. We might need a babysitter during football season," Maxon teases.

"Bite my ass."

With a laugh, he hangs up. I find myself smiling, too... until I realize the situation I'm in. The world has gone quiet for a few hours while everyone sleeps. Tomorrow morning will be an explosion of curiosity, nosiness, and ugly innuendo. Corinne will hate it. I need to shield her or she might give in to Parker's bullshit just to make the gossip disappear.

Until then, we have the dark. The still. The silence. I should be exhausted after barely sleeping last night. But I'm wired since I'll soon have Corinne next to me in bed. Even if I don't touch her, she'll be achingly close. How will I resist her?

Rising from my chair, I tiptoe down the hall. My bathroom door is still shut, telling me she's inside.

Damn. Relieving my tension is a must. I'd rather not do it alone, but if I'm going to keep my word and keep my hands off of her, I have to take the edge off.

After grabbing her underwear from my desk, I slide into the bathroom attached to my office and lock the door. Hand lotion in a delicate pump stands beside a matching decanter of soap. I shove Corinne's panties against my nose, yank down my shorts, slam a dollop of cream in my palm, and slather it onto my aching cock.

Then, as I slowly stroke myself, I open my thoughts to all the filthy things I'm dying to do to her.

Memories of her face in pleasure hit my brain—her soft face, her parted lips, her rosy cheeks. And those noises she makes as she approaches climax? Almost as stunning as her tits. They're perfectly proportional with the right size nipples in an erotically dusky hue. They're sensitive, too. She loved having them sucked. Yeah, maybe that was new for her. But she responded.

Then she asked for more, demanding I kiss her. She wrapped her arms around me, flattening herself against my body. I wish like fuck I could have lost my shirt, pressed my skin to hers, and drowned in her heat, in her scent.

My imagination takes over, spinning a vision of her pulling me down for a kiss and spreading her legs, her hips lifting to me in entreaty. We don't have to speak because I know her body and she's as hungry for me as I am for her. In my fantasy, she rolls me to my back, perches herself above me, and kisses her way down my body, beginning with my mouth before slowly, slowly trailing her lips across my chest, then nipping her way to my stomach, my hips, my thighs.

Fuck, I'm already desperate for her.

Then she cradles my balls in one hand and sends me a teasing smile. "I can't wait to get my mouth on you."

I could almost swear I hear her voice in my head as I grip her panties tighter and speed up my stroke. My chest tightens. My heart gallops. My skin burns.

“Suck me, princess.” That voice is mine, but it’s a foreign, strained rasp I barely recognize.

Thankfully, dream Corinne is happy to comply, planting on her knees beside me and leaning in, her eyes filled with the promise of pleasure that will rip me up and leave me ruined for anyone but her. And instead of running the fuck away from this possessive need, I can’t wait.

“Now,” I demand in a hoarse whisper.

After another sly smile, she complies. I jolt. Her scent fills my nose, torquing up my desire, as I shorten and speed up my strokes again.

In my head, she’s sucking me with swift, strong pulls. My legs threaten to collapse underneath me. I lean into the basin, the counter cutting into my hip, and I don’t care. Heat blisters me. Dizziness overwhelms me. Pleasure twists me.

This orgasm is going to destroy me.

“You like that,” she whispers in my head as she licks her way up my cock.

“Yes,” I growl out. “Fuck, yes.”

She giggles. “All day I thought about driving you insane.”

Fantasy Corinne needs to stop teasing me and start sucking me again before I die. Mentally, I fist her hair and push her mouth down on me, the jerky movements, centering on my crest, taking my desire up dangerously fast.

“Goddamn it.” I eke out the curse.

“Come for me,” she insists in my head just before she engulfs me in that destructive mouth.

It’s over. I’m done for. She’s going to kill me and I love it.

I suck in another breath, ripe with the scent of her pussy. It’s lingering in my nose, along with the smell of her skin, whetting my appetite. I need to get my mouth on her cunt, memorize her with my tongue—and I will. But right now, Corinne has all the power and I’m going down hard.

“Fuck!” My hand moves faster, my thumb hitting the sweet spot just under my crest. I pretend that’s her tongue, that she knows my body so well, she knows exactly how to send me over the edge...

Suddenly, a rough, guttural cry erupts from my throat. I clench my teeth to keep it in, but it’s no use. The sharp, staggering burst of ecstasy has me shouting into her panties and shuddering as I empty myself into the bathroom sink.

The second I’m done and I catch my breath, I open my eyes and stare back at my reflection in the mirror. Even in the mostly dark room, I’m obviously panting, ruddy, and flattened. I feel fucking ridiculous. The normal me would have worked around my promise to give her a couple of days and simply seduced her. I would have rationalized that she’s in my house, sleeping in my bed, and she wants a favor from me. Normally, that more than adds up to a hot fuck.

With Corinne...everything feels different. I never want her to regret me.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” the old me asks. “Stop masturbating and man up.”

But the usual tapes aren’t working. Maybe...she’s right. I use what happened with Hadley to keep every woman at arm’s length. It’s been my excuse for taking what I could from them and deleting phone numbers the next morning.

Is that making you happy?

Last week, I would have said yes. Now...

“Goddamn it.” I clean my self-inflicted mess, rake a hand through my hair, then let myself out of the bathroom. After shoving Corinne’s underwear in my desk drawer, I toss myself in my chair and heave a sigh.

How the fuck do I untangle my head?

Maybe I’m just tired. It’s possible a good night’s sleep will erase these maudlin thoughts and restore the ruthless manwhore most people—family excepting—love to hate.

For some reason, that notion makes me cranky.

What the hell has this woman done to me?

Sighing, I head for the door. Might as well face her and figure out this weird mood.

The dinging of my phone stops me before I can leave my office. It's not just any text—I've been ignoring a bunch of those—but a text with a specific ringtone. Hayes. I should have known I couldn't put this off.

I grab my cell, not even bothering to read the message, and dial his number.

“Congratulations, man!” Hayes's voice booms. “I had no idea you were dating anyone, much less thinking about getting engaged. You didn't say a word.”

There's a soft accusation in his tone. I deserve that.

“Thanks. It's...been a whirlwind, but I appreciate it.” I look at the clock. “Why are you awake? It's barely five in the morning in LA and it's Saturday.”

He laughs. “Our schedules are messed up. Echo and I flew to Boston to see Gramma Liddy for a few days.”

In the middle of the week? “She all right?”

“Fine. It had just been a while. Echo got a few days off from work, and we thought why not?”

“For sure. Glad to hear Liddy is still kicking.”

“Almost eighty and sharp as a tack. She kicked my ass at cards. Again.”

God, it's good to hear Hayes's voice and know that someone I care about so much is happy. “That's nothing new.”

“You're supposed to take my side.”

“Um, you're a great investment counselor. You're a horrible card player.”

“And you're a shitty friend,” he grumbles. “You didn't tell me you were even seeing Parker Emerson's sister. You never mentioned it because you knew I would question your sanity,

right? Did you two keep it on the down low until you decided to get married?”

“Something like that.”

“When did you meet? How the hell did you even get together?”

Shit. Concocting a “meet cute” Corinne and I can tell everyone has been on my list of things to do, but we haven’t gotten around to that yet. “Actually, buddy, it’s a long story, and I’m fucking wiped out. It seemed like an endless Friday after a few days of insomnia, and things are still insane at the office with Bethany out.”

“Having the market in disarray can’t be helping. I feel you, but—”

“You want to know. And I want to tell you.” I blow out a breath and think of another plausible way to stall. “Listen, I know you just got home from Boston, but how would you feel about coming here for my engagement party tomorrow night? I’ll fill you in then.”

That would buy Corinne and me time to get our story straight, but I totally expect him to say no.

“I was just going to ask if you wouldn’t mind if we crashed with you for the weekend?”

Seriously? It will be great to see him...but it’s horrible timing. I need to be alone with Corinne so we can perfect our act. Or I have to tell Hayes the truth. But I can’t. Echo is horrible at keeping secrets and my buddy would never not tell his wife something. And if I make arrangements with Maxon and Keeley for my friends to stay at their bed-and-breakfast—presuming they even have a vacancy—Hayes would know something is up.

“Hey, if it’s a hardship—”

“No,” I cut in. “Sorry, I’m just tired as fuck. Of course I want you to come. I asked, didn’t I?”

“Great! We were hoping that would be cool. Echo has a few more days off, and I miss Maui like hell.”

One impulsive trip back East to see his elderly grandmother I could believe. But an impromptu trip here, too—even with my engagement party—isn't like Hayes. “Is something up with you?”

“Can't I just want to see my best friend? It's been too long. And I have the dirt on what's up with the old gang...”

“You don't have to persuade me. You're always welcome.” I'll make it work.

“Good. While we've been talking, I found last-minute seats on a flight that lands about four o'clock. That okay?”

It gets them here for the party, and since Parker knows Hayes well, having him at our celebration will lend credence to the “engagement.” “Fantastic. I'll pick you up from the airport.”

“It will be great to see you. And I can't wait to meet Corinne. She must not be anything like Parker if you're in love with her.”

“She's not.” And we'll have to be more convincing than ever.

“I'm really happy for you. After the way Hadley destroyed you, I didn't think you'd ever recover.”

I still don't think I have, but I try to sound chipper as fuck. “Well, when you know, you know... Some of us aren't stupid enough to know the love of our life since second grade and fail to figure it out.”

“Fuck off.”

“You know I'm right.”

“And you'll never let me live it down.”

“Ever.” I grin. “See you tomorrow.”

“See you then.”

I was reluctant to take Hayes's call, and now I'm reluctant to let him go. It's been too long since we connected.

From the corner of my desk, I pick up a photo Echo framed shortly after their wedding. Decker out in my tuxedo, I'm standing to the left of Echo and Hayes, standard since I was his best man. The rest of the old gang—Graham, Kella, and Maryam—are around us, looking surprisingly put together. Grandma Liddy and Echo's two sisters, Ella and Eryn, round out the whole "family" photo.

Good times...

With a sigh, I rise and pad across the bamboo floors. In my bedroom, Corinne sits on the edge of the bed. She's wearing her pajamas again, the ones that, unfortunately, cover most everything. She stares at her phone.

Tears stream down her cheeks.

My chest tightens even as the sight ignites my rage. "What's the matter?"

She swallows and sets her phone aside. "Nothing."

"Bullshit. Are people online being assholes?" If they are, I'll be hard-pressed not to snarl and crack their skulls.

She shrugs. "No more than usual."

My mood darkens. "Is your brother being an asshole?"

"Did you expect anything different?"

After what he did to me, I have zero expectations of him doing anything but utterly fucking my life and trampling my future. Corinne, however, still had hope. I'm pissed that he crushed it.

I take her hands. "Princess, whatever he said...he's just angry. I've blocked him everywhere I could. Since he can't come after me, he's taking his shit out on you."

"I know. I just didn't expect it to hurt this much."

Underneath her anger, she still loves him. She clearly wishes they could see eye to eye. She yearns for his approval. And he's being a complete motherfucking son of a bitch. No surprise.

I don't know the first thing about handling a crying woman. I haven't really tried since my mother. But I can't not wrap my arms around Corinne and draw her against my chest. "He deserves your anger. He doesn't deserve your tears."

"Why does he have to be this way?" she sobs against me. "He was always the favorite with my grandparents. He could do no wrong, probably because he's so much like my grandfather."

"A judgmental prick?"

"Grandpa wasn't, but when he felt as if someone in his life was making the wrong decisions, he would try to steer them in a different direction. Parker took that ten steps further. Plus, he knows how much it's bothered me that, as far as my grandparents were concerned, I never quite measured up. For years, I scrambled to catch up to my brother—"

"Wait. You're twenty times the person Parker is, and your grandparents were blind or warped if they didn't see how amazing you are."

"You didn't know me as a kid."

"I knew you as a teenager." A little, anyway. "You were quiet and thoughtful, considerate even then."

"Translation: I was a doormat. Apparently, I still am."

Is that what she thinks? "No, you're standing up to Parker and fighting, taking back what's yours—even though you shouldn't have to. He's being a real rat bastard."

"But I have those moments where I wonder if he's right. Maybe I've picked something stupid to do with my life."

I scowl. "Do you enjoy it?"

"Every day. I look forward to creating something unique for the people who order from me. And they get so excited when they receive their bands. Some even write me these lovely notes, which always make me smile..." Her face lights up so brightly when she talks about her job, she almost glows.

"Then it's not stupid. Don't let your brother in your head."

She grimaces. “I’m trying to keep him out, but he’s questioning my judgment—and my sanity.”

“He’s hitting hard because he’s furious you’re ‘engaged’ to me.”

Corinne nods. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard him this angry. It’s ugly.”

More than she thought possible, it seems. “That’s not on you.”

“Isn’t it? I sought you out, knowing there literally isn’t another person on the planet who would trigger him more.”

“It’s not your job to worry about his emotions. They’re his problem. You have enough on your plate, keeping your business afloat.”

“But he’s my brother.”

“And you’re his sister. Is he trying at all not to upset you? No, he’s carrying on like he’s right, as always, and doesn’t give a fuck about your feelings.”

She nibbles on her lip. “I know. Maybe I’m just tired and not thinking straight. Sorry. I don’t mean to dump my feelings in your lap.”

“It’s not a problem. I’m here.” Even if her tears made me feel something like panic at first, the truth is, she’s the most real woman I’ve ever been involved with. Well, we’re not actually involved, just pretending—can’t forget that. But she’s nothing like the women I usually fuck. She seems nothing like Hadley, always looking out for number one.

“Why are you being nice?”

I rear back. “What does that mean?”

She lifts a shoulder in a lazy shrug. “I guess I just thought, even if we’re in this scheme together, that you’d treat me more like the enemy. I assumed you’d be in this for yourself. I didn’t expect you to be almost like...a friend.”

Her honesty softens me. It’s unnerving how much I like knowing how she feels. “Don’t friend-zone me. We still have

to act like we're in love. And I'm still going to fuck you, princess."

Corinne snuffles, then laughs. "There's the jerk I expected."

"You're welcome." I flash her a grin.

I should feel better that we're on a less touchy-feely footing, but I don't. She was opening up to me, and I just didn't know what to say.

When I was with Hadley, we rarely connected on this level. For years, I assumed I sucked at being sensitive because she brushed off conversations and initiated sex instead. Looking back, it's obvious she not only didn't love me, she didn't care at all.

Fuck, I've buried most thoughts about my ex since the breakup. But today, her ghost has been everywhere. I need to put it to rest and focus on Corinne.

"I'm going to brush my teeth and go to bed." She stands.

Without even stopping to think, I grab her wrist and tug her down to my lap.

"Xavian?" Perched on my thighs, she blinks at me.

Shit, what am I starting here? "Are you going to be okay?"

A smile curls up her lips. They aren't painted some sexy color. Her face is devoid of all makeup. Her hair is pulled away from her face, without any hint of the tumbling curls I want to grab in my fists. And I still think she's the most beautiful woman I've ever touched, especially when my simple question makes her smile.

"I think so. Thanks."

"Listen, if you need tonight to yourself, I've got four other beds in this house. I'll find one of them."

Normally, I never show mercy. But Corinne seems so down, and I like that, right now, she doesn't think I'm a douchebag.

"It's your bed. I'll find another one."

But something about the idea of her in mine, half-naked on my sheets, isn't just a turn on, it feels right. Like she belongs here.

It's official; I'm crazy.

"Stay. I'll grab a few things and be out of your hair."

"I thought you said we need to get used to each other."

"You've been through enough today. We'll work it out tomorrow."

"Thanks."

Even though I'd ten times rather slip my hand under her shirt—to test my theory that she isn't wearing a bra—while I kiss her breathless, I help her to her feet and gather my stuff. "I'll be down the hall if you need me."

She nods. "Good night."

At the door, I hesitate, remembering that we have business. "My best friend, Hayes, and his wife, Echo, are flying in for our party tomorrow. They'll be staying here this weekend."

"So we'll have to be constantly on? And we'll have to sleep together?"

"Yeah. If we want to keep up pretenses, there will be no way around it. Get ready..."



The airport is a zoo.

Hayes and Echo enter baggage claim, looking the same as always—in a good way. My buddy's bohemian wife loves hiking and outdoor activities, so he's avoided the desk-jockey paunch tons of guys get. And they're obviously happy, walking hand in hand, like they share a secret the rest of the world will never understand.

"X!" Echo darts for me, skirts swishing, arms outstretched.

"Hey!" I scoop her up in a big hug and twirl her around.

“That’s my wife, scumbag. Hands off,” Hayes growls, grinning from ear to ear.

“I let you have her V-card,” I protest, joking about our graduation trip to Maui right after college, when Echo asked me to do the honors because Hayes still hadn’t noticed she was female and fuckable. Thank god he came to his senses.

“That’s the only reason you’re alive.”

Echo laughs. “It’s ancient history. Forget it.”

“As long as you remember you’re mine,” my pal insists before enveloping me in a bro-hug. “How the hell are you? Where’s your soon-to-be better half?”

“Having her hair and makeup done for the party.”

I had to twist Corinne’s arm to keep the appointments Harlow made on her behalf. She worked all morning while we talked through our ruse. Together, we agreed to release a picture I swiped from Duke’s footage of me kneeling at Corinne’s feet, ring in hand, to social media, along with a statement officially announcing our engagement. Then we turned off our phones, knowing the world was about to explode. The last hurdle? Our fabricated meet cute has to hold water.

“Aww.” Echo frowns. “I was hoping to chat before the festivities.”

I get it. She’s only been gone a few hours, and it’s already weird not having her around. I...miss her. At least I think that’s what I’m feeling.

“Corinne will see us there. And you’ll have lots of time to get to know her this weekend, I promise.”

“Good. I can’t imagine who’d traipse down the aisle with you. She must be a brave, brave soul,” Hayes teases.

“Or she really likes sex.” Echo winks.

I wish. Corinne was buttoned up and all business this morning. Is she embarrassed that our conversation last night crossed into such personal territory? Or is she keeping me at arm’s length for some other reason?

Whatever. I don't like it. I'd rather have her as she was before we went to our respective beds—soft, sweet, open, sharing herself like it meant something to her. Like *I* meant something.

I sound like a schmuck.

And I feel even worse when I remember I'm lying to my best friends. The guilt is like sludge clogging my chest and tightening my throat.

After more good-natured ribbing, Hayes collects their checked bags and we race to my house. In the garage, I glance at my watch. "It's just after five. I hate to rush you—"

"But we have to leave in thirty minutes?" Hayes guesses.

"Or less.

We all retreat to our respective corners. Twenty-five minutes later, the three of us pile into an SUV I keep for weekend activities and head to Maxon and Keeley's, the conversation and laughter flowing.

"So Kella was doing her usual walk of refusing to feel shame one morning after leaving some dude's hotel room during a comic book event..." Echo begins. "She was literally on the phone complaining to me that her sex life was stale—"

"Because she only ever hooks up with guys who like anime, video games, and cosplay."

Echo nods. "That was her type—until she met Ryan, who was towing her car away because she'd parked illegally. He offered to let her ride with him to the impound yard, and they argued the whole way there. Later, she told me she couldn't stop staring at his massive arms and his beard. So to get Ryan 'out of her system,' she offered to do him in the parking lot."

"That sounds like Kella," I drawl.

"Get this. He refused."

"Has she ever been turned down?"

"I can't think of a single occasion."

Hayes jumps in. “Instead of fucking her, Ryan asked her out. He took her to dinner, then to dance—at a honky tonk.”

“She didn’t break out in hives and run away?”

Echo shakes her head. “She loved it. We were all shocked. Now they’ve been dating for six weeks, despite the fact he likes country music, goes to church with his family, and drives a truck.”

I gape. “Things she’s always despised.”

“Yes, but she swears Ryan is *the one*.”

“Crazy for the girl who swore she would never get involved with guys like Hayes or me because we were too masculine and would want too much control.”

“She’s clearly changed her tune”—Echo grins—“because Ryan pulls her hair and makes her beg for it. And she’s not complaining at all. In fact, she’s hoping he proposes so she can have his babies.”

“Kella having *babies*?” That’s insane, like hearing all aliens didn’t come from outer space but Cheboygan.

“Right? She took out her nose stud and her brow ring. She gave up combat boots. She even wears lace. And dresses.”

“I’m shocked.” And that’s an understatement.

“Right?” Echo concurs. “Despite being anti-commitment, I always figured she would find her soul mate someday, but...”

“Same.” I’m glad it’s not one of those twerps she constantly picked up and mowed down. “How’s Graham taking it?”

“He seems a little devastated.” Hayes grimaces.

“That was never going to happen,” I point out.

“No, he’s far too rich and intellectual for her,” Hayes agrees. “Then again, I didn’t think she’d ever go for a beer-drinking, football-loving tow truck driver, either.”

Fair point. “So Graham is just going to keep pining?”

“No. He’s decided to move on. He’s taking a job in New York.”

It’s really where he belongs. “And Maryam?”

“Finishing her masters. She’s already got three lucrative offers from tech firms in Silicon Valley, but you know her.”

“Still determined to write her own software and change the world?”

“Yep. She’s decided to head back to India for a few years to make a difference there.”

“Good for her. The gang is all moving on with their lives.”

“We are.” Echo turns to Hayes, and they exchange a glance. My buddy nods.

My gut tightens. “What is it?”

But suddenly I know.

“We’re having a baby!” Echo squeals.

Her announcement is like a punch to my solar plexus. I knew this day was coming, but the news hits me hard. My best friend has not just a career he enjoys but a wife he loves with all his heart—and now a baby on the way.

What am I doing besides growing millions and chasing a different piece of ass every night?

I paste on a smile and offer my fist to bump. “Congratulations, you two. That’s fantastic!”

Hayes grins like he has the world by the tail. “Thanks. We’re thrilled. The news isn’t unexpected...but welcome.”

“You went to tell Liddy in person?”

“Yeah. She’s so excited for us.” Echo bounces in the back seat.

“That’s great!” And I really am happy for them. I don’t know two more deserving people.

But something is tearing a jagged gash through my chest. It’s wrong. Sad. Ugly.

Envy.

“What’s even better? Both of my sisters are expecting baby number two, so our munchkin will have cousins to play with.”

“Perfect,” I say, trying not to feel kicked in the teeth.

But it’s not Echo’s fault. I blame Hadley for the fact I’m alone. She cheated. She crushed me. She found me lacking.

Is that really fair, though? She’s been gone more than five years, and it seems wrong to blame a dead woman. Besides, I’d rather blame Parker.

Isn’t the blame yours? You made choices...

“March sounds so far away, but I’ll be a *mom*. I’m panicking with all the things I have to do...” Echo goes on.

Thankfully, Hayes talks her down and fills the conversational gap. I’m on autopilot as I pull up to Maxon and Keeley’s place about fifteen minutes before the party starts.

My oldest brother comes out to greet me, holding his little redheaded daughter. She’s nearly four, and like her mama, all she wants to do is sing.

“Hey!” Maxon helps Echo out of the car and brings her in for a hug.

Since I moved here, my family has embraced my friends. The fact they’re like extended siblings is evident when Griff, Harlow, Bethany, Evan, and their spouses all spill outside to greet them.

It’s great to see everyone, but I can’t stop scanning the lanai and looking through the big accordion doors into the house. “Corinne here yet?”

“Afraid she’ll run away if you let her out of your sight, bro?” Harlow teases, bumping my shoulder and generally giving me shit, as she always does.

“Ha. Don’t you have a husband you can torment?”

Noah Weston approaches, still in amazing athletic shape, despite having retired nearly five years ago. “I took the night off.”

“Nope. You said I do to this she-devil—no idea what you were thinking—”

“That she looked hot in a red bikini.”

“Eww. Stop,” I protest. “And come...do whatever it is you do to manage her.”

“What? Huh?” He puts his hand to his ear and acts confused. “I can’t hear. Old football injury.”

“You’re full of shit.”

“If you’re just now figuring that out, you’re not as smart as the rest of us.” Griff saunters up, laughing—until Noah mock punches his arm.

Suddenly, Maxon joins the fray, now minus Kailani, and the three of them exchange insults while chasing each other on the nearby patch of grass. Hayes jumps in, as if he’s been away a mere day or two, not months.

“Men.” Harlow just shakes her head, eliciting a laugh from Echo. “To answer your question, Corinne is on her way.”

“Good.” I straighten my tie, my stomach knotted. Tonight is make or break, and I’m anxious to see her. “Thanks.”

Evan and his wife, Nia, appear, talking business with his best friend and CFO, Sebastian Shaw. The man’s wife plants a hand on his arm, breathing in and out as she lays her palm over her distended belly.

She looks ready to pop. “Hey, Sloan. You okay?”

“Fine. Just feeling like the side of a barn.”

“I think you look beautiful,” Sebastian says. “You give me an hour and I’ll prove it.”

“You’re not touching me anymore.”

“That’s what you said after the last time I got you pregnant. You forget how persuasive I can be...”

I grimace. “TMI, you two.”

Bas laughs and holds out his hand. “You’re just jealous.”

A week ago I would have laughed and told him he was crazy. Now...I think he's right.

Keeley maneuvers the group inside by whistling loudly and reminding everyone that the guests will begin arriving shortly. The crowd meanders to the kitchen at the back of the house. The morons rumbling in the grass filter in last.

Under the comfort of spinning ceiling fans, Maxon pulls me away from the others. "How are you holding up? You ready for this?"

Hopefully. "Corinne and I have been working out the details."

"Can you two look like you're in love?"

"I think so." We're about to find out...but I'm not so nervous about that. In a handful of minutes, she'll meet my family. I want them to like her. No, they will. I know it. I'm anxious about her feeling welcome.

Why? She's temporary. Our engagement is a big lie. It shouldn't matter.

But for some reason, it does.

"Tell me the story you concocted about how you two met."

I open my mouth to recite our rehearsed spiel when I catch sight of Corinne out of the corner of my eye, hovering inside the doorway.

When I turn to look at her, my mouth drops open.

Harlow's stylist arranged her long hair into loose, beachy curls. Her makeup is light but artful, accenting her expressive dark eyes that look almost too big for her delicate face. Her lips are painted a soft, earthy pink. And her dress? Holy hell, after a glance, I'm melting.

It's a soft green with a scoop neck, a banded waist—and a deep V between the two. Besides flashing me a hint of cleavage, it clings to every curve God gave her until it comes to an abrupt ending a scant few inches down her thighs. She's accented the look with a pair of beige wedges, oversized earrings, and her engagement ring that winks right at me.

“Is that Corinne?” Maxon asks.

I can’t speak, just nod.

“When did she first approach you about this scheme?”

“Two days ago,” I manage, watching her scan the crowd for me.

“And you’re already looking at her like that?” Maxon laughs. “You’re so fucked, dude.”

I turn to glare at him. “What does that mean?”

“You’re falling for her.”

“It’s an act,” I protest, because what I’m feeling is crazy.

“I know it’s supposed to be, but... Use your smarts. If you’re this into her, grab her fast. Convince her to marry you for real before she gets away.”

“That’s your advice? You don’t even know her. She might be a horrible human being.”

He shakes his head. “You’re too smart to fall for someone like that, bro. And if you’re already halfway in love with her, she’s the real deal.”

Maxon only thinks I’m not stupid because he doesn’t know about Hadley—proof that my dick sometimes overtakes my brain.

On the other hand, what if he’s right?

Across the big, open house, Corinne tenses and reaches for her phone.

“Excuse me,” I mutter to my brother, then close the distance between Corinne and me. I can’t stop staring at her, and the relief on her face when she spots me makes me smile. “Wow, you look gorgeous. Obviously, you had no trouble finding the place.”

“I thought for a minute I had.” She glances around me at the suddenly silent family gawking at us. “The party is underway, I guess. That’s a lot of people.”

“This is just the family. Come here”—I wrap my arms around her and pull her close—“before they get suspicious. Only Maxon, Keeley, and Griff know the truth.”

Corinne fits her body against mine and looks up at me with a smile. I can’t resist kissing her cheek, her neck, her bare shoulder, then tipping her chin up for my lips.

“Don’t mess up her lipstick,” Harlow screeches.

Keeley, Nia, and Britta—my brothers’ wives—all rush to concur.

“Instead of making out with her, why don’t you introduce us?” Bethany raises her brow at me as she emerges from the study in the back of the house, Clint right behind her, the familiar case for her breast pump in hand.

The family crowds closer and, one by one, she meets them all. Even before I finish, Noah’s younger brother, Trace, and his wife dart in, grab a drink, and sidle up to us.

“Hi, Masey.” Corinne smiles and hugs the pretty, pregnant brunette. “I’m glad you’re here. I could use a familiar face.”

“You’ve met?” I frown.

Trace’s wife nods. “Harlow asked me to do her makeup, so I met her at the salon. Your fiancée has great skin.”

“Thanks.” Corinne smiles at Masey. “But if I look good, it’s because you’re incredibly talented. No wonder you have such a massive online following.”

“It’s my pleasure. As a beauty influencer, I love to help people feel like their most beautiful selves, whether that’s with makeup or not. But you happened to be naturally blessed.”

Suddenly, all the women surround Corinne and introduce themselves. I can’t even get near her. Talk quickly turns from cosmetics to her dress, to all the kids with the sitters at Griff and Britta’s place, then everyone’s Saturday, drink refills, and finally the reason we’re all here.

“Guests incoming!” Keeley shouts as she starts up some tunes. Queen’s “Crazy Little Thing Called Love” is pretty apropos mood music.

Corinne gravitates back to me, and I wrap an arm around her, burying my face in her curls, inhaling her addictive scent. “You ready for this?”

She nods, but she’s trembling. “I think.”

“We’ll get through this together. Don’t get too far from me. I know this crowd, so watch me for cues. If you’re not sure about something, either be vague or defer to me. I’ll—”

“Take it from there and make sure everything goes smoothly. We’ve been over the game plan a thousand times.”

She’s right. “We’ve got this.”

I squeeze her, and she sends me a nervous smile.

Then guests start pouring in. My sisters-in-law’s friends—yoga buddies, fellow moms, and neighbors, along with their spouses—all bring celebratory bottles of wine and other gifts that make me feel like a shit for this subterfuge. But this isn’t just for my revenge; it’s for Corinne’s independence.

My assistant, Lisa, appears, secretive smile in place. Yeah, she’s got my back. Her husband, Dan, is his usual affable self, waving at me from across the crowd.

Local reporters turn up then. One of Noah’s former football buddies and his wife enter in with smiles. Some of my clients who live on the island appear, too. Caterers follow, and before I know it the party is in full swing.

As I predicted, Echo and Corinne fall into conversation like they’ve known each other forever. If our engagement was real, they’d definitely be the best of friends. I hover nearby, and Hayes is amused that I refuse to let my “fiancée” out of my sight.

As the party goes on, so does the mingling. Corinne is absolutely charming. She smiles. She asks the right questions. She clings to my hand and looks up at me just often enough that people are convinced we’re for real. Dinner is equally smooth. There’s good food, laughter, and flowing alcohol. The reporters’ beats are more sports and less gossip, so their interest in us is largely passing. Everyone seems to be vibing and it’s a perfect Hawaiian evening.

Then, as if the clearing of the dinner plates signals the gloves coming off, Harlow clinks her knife against her glass to get everyone's attention. "Welcome, everyone! Thanks for coming on such short notice to celebrate Xavian and Corinne's engagement, despite the fact my little brother is a pain in the ass. We love him anyway...but we're hoping his lovely bride-to-be will make him less surly. No, wait. I meant to say we hope they'll make each other very happy."

The guests laugh, and I make a face at Harlow. "You're not funny."

"Everyone else disagrees." She grins.

They chuckle again, and I give a sanguine shrug. "Because they're mostly your friends."

More laughter ensues before she takes command of the room again. Harlow really is a dynamo, and she presides over this event perfectly.

"And now for the moment we've all been dying for. You two have put off everyone, but the gang is together, so spill! How did you two meet, when did you start dating, and how did you carry on in secret until you got engaged?"

My gut clenches. *Show time.*

Plastering on a smile, I stand and take Corinne's hand, pulling her up beside me. "Fate was working overtime the day we bumped into each other. Eight months ago, as many of you know, my sister Bethany was having a rough pregnancy, so I took her client meetings on the West Coast for a week while she was on bed rest."

A true, verifiable fact—what we rooted most of our tale in.

Beside me, Corinne nods and delivers her part of our rehearsed story. "Around the same time, I was flying to Connecticut for a high school friend's bachelorette party."

"While I was at LAX, trying to get back to Maui. Our flights were both delayed." More verifiable truth. We actually were at the same airport on the same day...but here's where the fabrication starts.

“And we were both starving,” she adds.

“So I found the nearest place to grab a burger and a beer and I see this gorgeous woman”—I hold up Corinne’s hand—“sitting at the crowded bar, trying to fend off a drunken jackass. I sidled over, put myself between them, wrapped my arm around her, then turned to the jerk and asked why he was hitting on my wife. He left.”

Corinne smiles at me. “Thank goodness.”

“And since his now-empty seat was the only one in the restaurant, I grabbed it.” I shrug. “As I sat, I thought she looked familiar, but I couldn’t place her.”

“We met when I was barely fifteen. He hardly remembers me from that Christmas he spent with my family. I had a crush on him back then. When he realized I’m Parker’s sister, it was awkward until we got to talking. It wasn’t long before I realized he isn’t the bastard my brother made him out to be.”

I take over with a nod. “When we looked up a few hours later, I had missed my flight and hers had been canceled altogether. So she let me crash on her couch that night.”

“You’ve never spent a night on a sofa at a woman’s place,” Clint drawls.

“Despite his reputation, he did!” Corinne insists. “He also said he’d be back in LA a couple of weeks later and wanted to take me to dinner to thank me. I agreed. After that, we started texting, then talking on the phone. By the time he came back through town, I had a whole new crush on him.”

The ladies *aww* at her remark.

“It was mutual, so we kept in touch. We never told anyone because we wanted to explore what might be between us without hassle or drama. But as the release of Parker’s movie approached, Corinne was torn.”

“My brother is all the family I have left,” she explains. “By then, I was in love with Xavian, and I wasn’t happy about the way Parker had maligned his character. But I didn’t want to put a bigger target on Xavian’s back if my brother found out about our relationship...so I broke things off.”

“We’ve been on-and-off for a while. Each time we ended it, I tried to go back to my old dating habits.” I shrug. “But I couldn’t stop thinking about Corinne. You’ll all be shocked—I know—but I realized she was the one for me, so I bought a ring and planned a trip to LA. I was going to talk everything out and propose. But she reached me first, making an appointment to discuss her finances under a false name. Lisa can back me up on that.”

“I can,” my assistant puts in, raising her glass to me.

“Corinne and I agreed to have dinner, which everyone on social media saw,” I drawl. “We both admitted we’re in love. I popped the question...and here we are.”

The room is silent for a nerve-racking moment before claps and hearty cheers erupt. We answer a few more questions about where we’ll be living—here in Maui—and when we plan to get married—we haven’t set a date yet—when my brother Evan pipes up. Usually, he’s quiet at gatherings like this. He’s not a social creature...but he’s a very inquisitive one.

“What is it you love about each other above all others?”

I slide a glance at Corinne.

She casts a wide-eyed stare at me and swallows. “Um...”

Shit. Evan doesn’t mean to be combative, but his question is a broadside to our bow. If I don’t answer fast, we’ll go down like the Titanic. “Corinne is thoughtful, always trying to see everyone’s side of an argument and find common ground. She’s kind. When I met her at her hotel a couple of days ago to talk, she encountered an elderly man who was lost. She didn’t just walk by. She cleaned his glasses, calmed him down, and helped him to his room. She’s passionate about the things and people who are important to her. She’ll never do anything halfway—not being a friend or a wife or a mother. She will be there for those she loves every moment of every day. For me, other women just don’t compare anymore. I can’t picture my life with anyone else.” I smile. “She makes me want to be a better man.”

“Everything you said about my sister is true, but she can’t make you into something you’ll never be.”

chapter SEVEN

That fucking voice. I really hope like hell I'm hallucinating, but when I look up...no.

The crowd gasps. People turn.

Parker Emerson stands in the middle of my brother's living room, glaring daggers at me.

Automatically, I slide Corinne behind me, sandwiching her between my body and the dining room table. "Get out. You're not welcome here."

Corinne's brother prowls closer. He hasn't changed much. He's still got artfully mussed hair, still wearing designer glasses, still dressed in clothes that belong more on a golf course than on a hipster, and he still has a babyface that cons suckers into feeling sorry for him.

"Let go of my sister, you son of a bitch."

"That's not happening. We're engaged. Nothing you say or do will change that."

"So the internet wasn't trolling me?"

I hold up Corinne's left hand. "No."

Parker's face contorts in fury. "My phone started blowing up. It's all over the news." His eyes narrow on me. "You really think I'd ever let you call my little sister your wife? Of course, that presumes you could even keep your dick out of other women long enough to say I do."

"Parker!" Corinne rebukes.

"I don't know how he sweet-talked you into believing he deserves you, but he's the bastard son of a criminal. He came from nothing. And he'll always be nothing because he has no scruples."

"You want to talk about scruples?" I growl. "You and I both know what really happened. I told your sister, too."

“Your version of the truth is garbage.” He scoffs, looking me up and down. “You may have money now, but *you’re* garbage. You obviously tricked her into saying yes to your proposal. You fed her lies, and you bought her.”

It takes all my restraint not to punch this asshole. “Are you insinuating your sister is a whore? If you are, that makes you the douchebag. Corinne is sweet and loving. She can’t be bought. With the way you’re insulting her, it’s no wonder she would rather be with me.”

Parker draws up. “Don’t twist my words. I meant that Corinne isn’t worldly. She couldn’t have known you would use your money to deceive her so you could try to stop me from speaking the truth. My sister is innocent.” He slants a glance over to Corinne, then back at me, his accusation heavy. “Or she was.”

Behind me, she lets out an embarrassed gasp. Screw punching him; I want to kill him. “Get out. Now. Or I swear to fuck I will smash your face black and blue and I will relish every second.”

“Because bullies like you enjoy hurting others.” He stares at his sister again. “Don’t you see the kind of man he is?”

At the head of the table, Maxon stands. “You need to go. This is a private party on private property, and you’re trespassing.”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Maxon Reed. I own this place. I also happen to be Xavian’s brother, and I want you gone.”

Parker opens his mouth. Before he can spout off to Maxon, Corinne pushes past me.

I grab her arm to pull her back. I don’t want her anywhere near her brother. “Princess...”

She shrugs me off and marches toward her brother, hands on her hips.

Parker’s gloating face floods my veins with venom. I don’t care what the asshole says about me anymore, but if he dares

to insult her or degrade her again, I will go to the ends of the earth to eviscerate him.

He holds out his hand to Corinne. “It’s okay. You didn’t know the kind of guy he is. I tried to shelter you—”

“Stop it. Just stop!”

The whole room falls silent. No one even breathes.

“Ninny...” he cajoles. “I don’t know what he—”

“Shut up,” she snaps. “How *dare* you crash my engagement party? Haven’t you done enough to Xavian? You’ve insinuated he’s the kind of vile human being who feeds off others’ misery, who would tell lies just to crush his enemies so he could cash in on their misfortune. But that’s not him at all. Xavian is funny and charming and thoughtful, not the mean-spirited predator you’ve made him out to be. Why doesn’t the public know about Hadley? Why didn’t you ever tell *that* story? Because you wouldn’t be the victim if everyone knew you betrayed him?”

He scowls and waves away Corinne’s accusation as if it’s irrelevant, but I see panic on his face. “She has nothing to do with anything.”

Corinne gapes. “She was his fiancée.”

“Their relationship wasn’t going to last. I told him that.”

“You made sure it didn’t when you slept with her.”

“She came onto me,” he protests.

“So that makes it okay to screw your best friend’s bride? You broke his trust in the worst way. What’s more despicable is that you didn’t take her to bed because you had feelings for her; you did it to prove a point.”

“And I was right. For trying to save a friend from a lifetime with a gold-digging whore, what did I get? Snubbed. Bullied. Derided. Persecuted.”

“Don’t you think maybe you earned some of that?”

Parker looks stunned. “You don’t know what he did to me.”

“What did he do that you didn’t bring on yourself? Your compulsive need to ‘win’ every argument ruins all your relationships. And if the argument isn’t going your way, you twist events around until they fit what you want everyone to believe.”

“I don’t. He’s filled your head with poison, and you’re only acting this way because I’m withholding the money in your trust until you grow up. Last week, I almost gave in... But clearly, I made the right choice. You’re still a gullible child.”

“Not another fucking word,” I growl, stepping between him and Corinne again. “You don’t get to trespass on my brother’s property to bad-mouth my fiancée during our engagement party. Unlike you, I’ll never tell Corinne who she can and can’t talk to, but after the way you’ve behaved tonight, if she never spoke to you again, I would completely support her decision. And if that’s her choice and you’re grappling to understand why, take a hard look at yourself in a mirror.” I get right in his face, barely holding back the urge to hit him, and only because he’d press charges for assault—another way to make himself the victim in the press. “Get. The fuck. Out. Now.”

Parker opens his mouth to protest when a pair of police officers enter the house and take in the scene. “Is there a problem?”

Parker tugs on his starched shirt. “No, I was just leaving.” Then he looks Corinne’s way. “You’ll regret him. I’ll be waiting when you finally figure out he’s not husband material, but a monster.”

With a huff, he’s gone. Instantly, the tension leaves the room. Nervous chatter ensues. Lisa catches my eye and holds up her cell phone to indicate she captured the whole thing on video. I give her a thumbs-up while Maxon and Griff talk to one of the officers. The other detains Parker on the lawn.

I turn to Corinne, who looks a heartbeat away from sobbing. She lost her only brother and the last of her family

tonight. Sure, the asshole brought it on himself, but she's the one who's hurting.

As I wrap her in my arms and kiss the top of her head, she sags against me and clings. She found the courage to stand her ground and confront him about his bullshit, and I'm so proud of her.

Then the truth hits me... She defended me.

No, she chose me over him.

A wave of warmth spreads through my chest. It's not mere admiration, though I think she's amazing. It's not just lust, though I'm dying to bare her soft, sweet body and make love to her. What I'm feeling is something else—something more I don't have a name for.

I'll figure that out later. She needs me now.

Cupping her face in my hands, I lift her gaze to mine. "You okay, princess?"

"Why did he come here and ruin everything?"

I could tell her it's because he's an asshole who doesn't care who he shits on if he makes himself feel better. I'd be right...but that wouldn't help her. "Don't focus on him. Things have a way of working out. Just know that every word I said about you tonight is true. People care about you. I care about you."

Corinne snuffles and buries her head in my chest, fists wrapped around my shirt that's now hopelessly wrinkled, and I don't care. "Everything I said about you was true. And I care about you, too."

She looks up at me. The soft welcome on her face doesn't merely tug on my cock. It hits me in the heart, which I would have sworn even a handful of days ago was too hard to spare a single fuck for Parker Emerson's sister. Now I'm losing myself in her misty dark eyes, and I can't stop it. We might have a pretend engagement, but suddenly this feels more real than anything I had with Hadley.

I lower my head. Her eyes slide shut. My pulse kicks into overdrive. I've only ever kissed Corinne for the cameras or to prepare for them. Now I'm dying to slide my lips over hers and take full possession of her mouth for no other purpose than pleasure. Than connection.

Someone clearing his throat interrupts us. I look up to find Maxon standing nearby, an officer beside him.

Goddamn it.

"Sorry. He has some questions," my brother says. "For you both."

"Did you press charges?" I ask Maxon.

"For trespassing?" He shrugs. "Do you want me to?"

My knee-jerk reaction is to nail that motherfucking son of a bitch for any infraction that will stick. But Corinne looks up at me with that crushed expression. Going after Parker might make me feel better, but it also puts her squarely between us. Well, between her ambition and her family. It serves no purpose except to make her life more difficult.

Fuck.

I swallow my pride. "No. A warning for him to stay off your property is enough."

Maxon nods, but I sense his approval. Then he turns to the officers. "Anything else?"

After a few identifying questions, the policeman asks for a recap. It must jibe with the others' accounts, because he nods and leaves in search of his partner, who's detaining Parker on the lawn.

Hayes eases up beside me, Echo's hand in his. "God, Parker is still a raving dick." He grimaces Corinne's way. "No offense."

"None taken. He's always been hardheaded and unable to admit when he's wrong. But Hollywood and fame have made all that worse."

"I'm sorry," Echo murmurs, caressing Corinne's arm.

“No, *I’m* sorry. You came all this way to celebrate and it turned into a disaster.”

“I came here to support friends, and that’s what I’m doing.” Echo smiles.

Her kindness has Corinne tearing up again. “Thank you.”

Harlow sidles up to my “fiancée” next. “Oh, honey. I know he’s your brother, but if you need someone to knee his balls into his nasal cavities, I’m your girl.”

Corinne laughs, despite her tears. “I appreciate that, but I think it would be wise to defuse the situation and simply walk away.”

“Less satisfying, but you’re probably right. Listen, I don’t know how much X has told you about our illustrious father, but I promise he makes Parker look like an amateur. So if you need a shoulder or another woman who understands—because from what I hear, my younger brother’s sensitivity is all between his legs—call me. Anytime. I’m here for you.”

I ignore Harlow’s swipe at me. It’s her way of lightening the mood. And it made Corinne smile. “Thank you.”

“We’re both here.” Bethany glides up beside me and takes Corinne’s hand. “We understand.”

“That means a lot to me.” Corinne wraps her arms around herself like she’s cold.

She can’t possibly be—it’s August in Hawaii—but I wrap my arms around her in case it’s reassurance she’s lacking. “What else do you need, princess?”

“Quiet time?” she asks uncertainly—not surprising since everyone here has gathered to celebrate us.

I don’t give a fuck about that. “If you need to be alone, I’ll make that happen. I’ll take you home and let you have some peace.”

I’ll have to make up some reason for Echo and Hayes to explain why, instead of pleasuring her worries away all night long, I’m sleeping in another bedroom.

“I can’t do the crowd right now.” Corinne’s expression tells me she’s hanging by a thread when she reaches for my hands and grips them tight. “But...don’t leave me.”

Normally, a clingy woman would send me running away, but Corinne isn’t clinging as much as sharing her pain—an agony I understand—with me, her brother’s enemy. Someone she barely knew a few days ago. But here she is, asking *me* to comfort her.

“Whatever you need, princess.”

She presses herself against me and whispers up into my ear. “Is there someplace else we can go?”

Before she falls apart.

“Give me a minute. I’ll make it happen.”

I don’t even stop myself to ask why I’m so willing to give her whatever she needs, I just do it. Besides, it’s possible Parker knows where I live. Corinne doesn’t need a repeat of this evening.

Leaving her in Echo’s and my sisters’ capable company, I tug Maxon into a quiet corner. “You got a vacancy tonight?”

His green eyes glow in the shadows. He’s feeling protective, too, and I love my family all the more for their support. “The ohana is free. The honeymooners who booked it for tonight ended up calling off the wedding, so...”

“We’ll take it.” I doubt Echo and Hayes will mind staying alone at my place, and Hayes will happily deal with Parker if he dares to show his face. “Just let me know how much—”

“If you’re trying to pay me, I will punch you. Stop that shit. We’re family.”

Despite this shitty evening, I smile. “Thanks. After Corinne is settled, I’ll make sure the house gets cleaned up, as promised.”

Maxon nods and scans the room. “Thanks. Since the party is breaking up and people are heading home, I’m going to capitalize on the fact my wife and I have a babysitter for another couple of hours and take advantage of Keeley.”

“I didn’t need to know that.”

He shrugs, then turns serious again. “What are you going to do with Corinne? All night? In the most romantic bedroom in Maui?”

I know what I want to do—dry her tears, strip her down, caress her everywhere until she’s panting my name, then make her forget about every hurtful, horrible thing her brother said. I can’t. Yeah, I warned that the price of my help with this scheme was her body. But I refuse to be the kind of asshole who makes tonight about himself. Parker already did that.

Turning to look out the window at the dark, tropical night, I sigh. “I don’t have a fucking clue.”



“Come with me.” I hold out my hand to Corinne two minutes later and wait for her to take it.

She looks into my eyes, biting that bee-stung lip, then places her fingers in my palm. “Where?”

“Does it matter as long as you get some peace and quiet?”

“You’ll come with me?”

Her pleading eyes tell me I didn’t misread the situation. She really wants me near her. “Yeah.”

“Then it doesn’t matter.”

Because she’ll have me and I’m all she needs? Am I reading too much into her words? “Let’s go.”

“Wait.” She digs in her heels as she scans the open kitchen and dining room that look like a hurricane hit. “I just remembered... We promised Maxon we’d clean up after the party.”

When she detours toward the kitchen sink, I pull her back. “I’ll handle it.”

“How?” She frowns.

“You don’t worry. I’ll deal with that.”

“No, I can’t leave this mess to you. You’ve already been too wonderful, and I—”

“Shh. I’m still a selfish, raving son of a bitch.” Who let her throw herself into this ugly family feud so I could have revenge. “Don’t forget it.”

Yeah, yeah. It’s not my place to save Corinne from herself. She’s an adult, and telling her what’s best for her would make me no better than Parker. But if I have to choose between protecting her from her asshole of a brother and getting my vengeance against him, tonight I’m choosing the former. Parker will only chew her up and spit her out, regardless of the fact she’s his sister. She’s not ready to fathom playing that dirty. I not only can, I’m fucking good at it.

Am I really thinking of deferring my revenge to be her white knight and savior?

I scoff. There’s no one less suited to that than me.

“That’s not true,” she insists.

“Don’t kid yourself. Come on.”

As I pull her away from the kitchen and take the key to the ohana from the little office tucked to one side, we slip out the back of the main house. All the while, I’m texting Lisa with my free hand to find someone who can do the post-party cleanup. Right now, I don’t care what it costs.

Lisa replies that she knows exactly who to contact and it will be done in the next two hours. This is why I pay her a shitload and treat her well.

After a quick thanks, I send Maxon a message, letting him know a cleaning crew is on their way and I’m leaving a door open for them.

His reply? Keeley and I are busy. Fuck off.

Typical Maxon.

“Everything okay?” Corinne asks, frowning at my furious tapping.

I tuck my phone away and lead her up the stairs to the door. “It is now.”

“What is this place?”

If I tell her Keeley has made this into the ultimate honeymoon suite in the last couple of years, will it freak her out?

“The only vacancy at the inn tonight.” I unlock the door and grope around to find the light switch, filling the airy space with golden light that bounces off the gleaming hardwood floors and soft white walls.

Beside me, Corinne lets out a surprised gasp. I’ve only seen this place in pictures, but it’s romantic as hell. A big four-poster bed draped in pristine white and engulfed by plush tone-on-tone pillows dominates the room, surrounded by gauzy mosquito netting. Gentle trade winds blow in from the open doors leading to the generous lanai, complete with a cushy chaise for two and full-frontal views of the moonlit beach beyond.

“Wow,” she breathes.

“You like it?”

Corinne takes in the rest of the room—the quaint reading nook, the slender secretary desk, the spa-like bathroom, and the hot tub for two—with gaping wonder. She runs her fingers over a little bistro table and chairs adjacent to the quaint kitchenette. “This is...beyond.

“The view from here is the best on the property.” I point to the lanai.

She drifts in that direction. The moon suffuses her with a glow that makes her look ethereal and untouchable.

Despite that, I want to touch her so badly.

She’s hurting, so I shove down my need and gesture her to a comfy chair under a reading lamp. She shakes her head and stares at the lazy moon, shining in the dark tapestry of the twinkling stars in the night sky.

I follow her to the railing and stare her way. What is she thinking? “I’m sorry Parker showed up tonight and upset you.”

She pulls her attention from the view and faces me with a frown that says she has the weight of the world on her shoulders. “Why are you apologizing? He’s *my* brother. I should be the one saying I’m sorry.”

“I posted our ‘engagement’ photo online.”

“We agreed to that. And to posting the fact we intended to have a celebration tonight with friends and family. None of this is your fault.”

But it is. If I had stopped giving a shit about Parker’s fucking lies and stopped licking my wounds—and instead let karma do its job—Corinne wouldn’t be suffering.

Then again, she wouldn’t be with me now.

“It’s not too late to back out of this whole mess. You might hate your brother at the moment, but he’s your only family. The truth is, I don’t have a few million dollars on hand to lend you. It’s tied up in other ventures. So I wouldn’t blame you if you left, told him you’d made a mistake, and mended fences. And I’ll bet he’d give you your money.”

She gapes at me as if I’ve lost my mind. “I won’t capitulate again. I’ve made excuses for Parker for years. The old me would have told myself that even though his methods suck, he only wants what’s best for me, so I should be the bigger person and apologize to keep the peace. But he ripped off my blinders. I can’t unsee who he really is, and I can’t give him an apology I don’t mean simply because I’m afraid of losing him. I won’t do it for money that belongs to me, either. That would be condoning all the awful things he’s said and done to you. They’re unforgivable.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m used to that shit.”

“You shouldn’t be. You should never have to accept slurs and lies, especially from someone who was once a friend.”

I laugh to lighten the mood. “A testament to my lousy choice in friends.”

“I’m serious.”

She is, and I’m thoroughly humbled.

Swallowing is suddenly difficult as I take her hands. “Thank you. You didn’t have to defend me—”

“You didn’t have to defend me, either.” Her eyes are soft and thankful. “But you did.”

I shoot her a self-deprecating smile. “I couldn’t stop myself. He was being an asshole.”

“Exactly. I know my brother has negatively impacted your professional and personal life. I wish I could wave a wand and change that.”

“In a way, I’m glad you can’t. Having you in my life is one of the best things that’s ever happened to me.” The words are out before I can reel them back. It’s an admission that I more than like her, that I more than desire her.

Fuck, I might as well tell her I’m *thisclose* to falling in love with her.

The soft surprise on her face strips me down, leaving me wondering if she sees everything I’m feeling.

“Xavian,” she breathes my name, her heart in her eyes. “You don’t know how much it means to me that you stood up for me tonight. That you stood up *with* me. No one has ever done that.” She cups my stubbled cheek, her earnest face so full of trust and gratitude, but with something more than simple caring. I can’t put my finger on it. Is she falling for me, too? “I know what the public says about you, but they don’t know you like I’ve come to.”

My throat closes up; I can’t fucking speak. She’s about to say something else to make me feel a hundred feet tall that I don’t deserve. “Corinne—”

“I have no illusions that I’ll be anything but another girl you take to bed, but I don’t care. Just for tonight, can you pretend that I matter to you and make love to me?”

chapter EIGHT

*H*er soft entreaty fries my brain. My thoughts race. I can't breathe.

I've been offered sex often. But for the first time, I can't think of a seductive comeback.

I'm speechless.

Until now, I never thought I owed a woman in my bed anything but pleasure. If she got off a few times, I walked away without an ounce of guilt. I can't do that to Corinne. On the other hand, if I turn her down, my gut tells me this chance will never come again and I'll wish for the rest of my life that I'd fucking taken the opportunity to touch her.

"Princess..."

"Say yes. Just this once. All my life, everyone has left me, especially when I needed them. You didn't and..." She bites her plump lip the way she always does that drives me crazy. "Please."

Her pleading dark eyes twist me up. Even as I lift my hands to cup her face, I'm making a conscious choice to fall for her, because there's no way I spend tonight losing myself in her body and I don't come out of this wrecked.

At the moment, I don't care. I've never agonized over the future. Anticipated, plotted, and put countermeasures in place, sure. But my philosophy has always been that if I spent my time stressing, then when the shit hit the fan, I'd only have forced myself to live through the misery twice. But worry eats at me now. What if I make love to Corinne tonight and she walks away come morning?

I stare down into her eyes...and I see my fork in the road. I hesitate, and that's not like me. When I see something, I go after it. When I decide something, I do it. When I want something, I take it.

Still, she's different.

"I don't have to pretend you matter. But I want you to be sure. If you give me your virginity, I can't give it back."

She shakes her head, her dark curls brushing her delicate shoulders. "That's the thing. I've never felt compelled to be with anyone. In high school, waiting felt right because my boyfriends were passing crushes. In college, not getting involved made sense because I didn't want to regret throwing away my V-card on a random hot dude at a party."

"And Riley?" I choke out. Admittedly, I've fucked so many women that I've lost count, but I've never been in love. She gave her heart to that man. Despite the fact it shouldn't, that goddamn eats at me.

"We had opportunities. We made plans. We met for weekends." Corinne shrugs. "I just...didn't."

"But you want me?" More than the man she once hoped to marry?

Slowly, Corinne nods, her solemn stare never wavering.

My pulse surges. I tamp it down and try not to let excitement run away with my common sense. Tonight was heavy and emotional. She probably needs someone to hold her, and I shouldn't delude myself into thinking I mean more to her.

But what if she's feeling what I'm feeling? What if she's asking me to make love to her because it actually means something to her?

I'll spend all night inside her and do my best to make our pretend engagement into something real.

"Then take off your shoes," I demand as I slip off my suit coat and drape it over the nearby chaise.

Slowly, she grips the railing and steps out of her wedges before kicking them aside.

I loosen my tie. "Your earrings next."

With shaking hands, she withdraws the delicate silver chandeliers and places them in my upturned palm.

I dump my tie onto my coat, then settle her jewelry on the desk. “Now lose your dress.”

Yanking my shirt from my slacks and attacking the buttons, I watch her reach around to release the catch at her nape, then lower the zipper at the small of her back.

Holy shit, she’s really doing this.

My heart starts chugging. My skin starts tingling.

Suddenly, her dress falls away. Automatically, she covers herself by pressing the garment to her chest.

I shake my head. “Let it fall. Let me see you.”

Corinne swallows, still staring into my eyes. Is she looking for my reaction? For reassurance? Whatever she wants, she apparently finds it, because she lowers her arms. The dress slides down her torso, baring her rosy-tipped breasts, before she pushes it down her hips and lets it sink to the floor in a soft green puddle.

Fuck, she’s beautiful. If I was hard before, I’m pure steel now, engorged and aching.

Corinne isn’t the kind of girl photographed for a fashion magazine. Her breasts are too generous. Her hips are too wide. But she’s exactly the sort of woman coveted in old-fashioned pinups. Tiny waist. Fleshy legs. Somehow sweet and wholesome—but with a mouth made for sin.

Now the only thing left between me and her naked body is the tiny scrap of lace clinging to her hips. And once I get rid of that, I’ll take her in every way she’ll let me.

If I heap pleasure on her, is there any chance she’ll want me after our ruse is over?

No. I have to stop being ridiculous. Her life is in LA. She’ll make up with Parker someday because they’re family, then he’ll ensure I have no part in her life. And no matter how many orgasms I give her, she won’t fall in love with me. Hadley proved that.

But even if tonight will rip out my heart, I'm going to hold on to Corinne as long as I can.

"Xavian?" she asks uncertainly.

She should never be unsure of herself. "You're stunning."

"You don't have to say things like that. I already said yes."

"I'm telling you the truth. Come here." I motion her closer.

Corinne pads toward me shyly, her bare feet silent. The moon glides over her skin, only to be swallowed by the dusky shadows of the bedroom. Her hips sway. Her breasts bob. Her stare clings to me in the dark as I shrug off my dress shirt and absently toss it over the desk chair behind me.

She takes in my shoulders and chest with a wide-eyed stare. Her trembling hand follows.

Her first touch detonates me like a bomb, despite the fact her fingers skim my skin with the utmost tenderness. Her palm brushes down my pec, pausing to feel my sensitive nipple. I suck in a breath at her touch.

Then her gaze slides down to my fly. "You're hard everywhere."

"You do that to me. You did from the first moment I laid eyes on you."

"You made me feel something, too. Fluttery. Giddy. So female. I came to your office for business. I told myself the feeling was ridiculous—"

"It wasn't." I can't stand not having my hands on her anymore, so I cup her waist, skimming the inward curve and tugging her closer. "It isn't. You *are* so fucking female."

Everything else I mean to say escapes me as I caress my way up to her breast, taking its weight in my palm and brushing my thumb over her nipple. Corinne lets out a long breath as her head falls back. Her rigid peak turns impossibly harder. The other follows suit. Goose bumps break out all over her skin. Electricity fills the air.

All I can think about is stripping off those little white panties and burying myself deep, but she'll only ever have one first time. It's a given that she'll eventually regret me. I can't stop that, but I can ensure her every memory of this night is one that makes her flush and sigh.

Then she arches, thrusting her breast deeper into my palm. I stroke her soft, soft skin before dragging my wayward thumb across her sensitive tip once more. I wrap my other hand around her nape and haul her still closer. We share breaths. Our stares tangle and fuse.

"I want to do every filthy thing I've ever thought to you."

"Please."

"You're not making it easy to restrain myself. A princess shouldn't be asking a guy like me to fuck her."

Her eyes rebuke me softly. "Don't say that."

"It's true. But if I'm what you want, I'll never say no."

My mouth crashes over hers and my tongue invades deep, tasting, taking, demanding. But my hands glide down her body like a whisper until I'm cupping her hips and fitting her against me like we're two perfect pieces of a puzzle.

Almost instantly, she sways closer, cozying against me as she loops her arms around my neck and tilts her mouth to take our kiss deeper. For the first time, she's completely open to me. I feel it in the slide of her tongue, in the way she presses her tits to my chest, in the jerk of her hips against my hard-as-fuck shaft.

Pleasure jolts my body as she clutches my shoulders. I yank her flush against me, rocking against her to simulate exactly how I plan to penetrate and violate her the minute I get her under me. Her breath catches.

This moment feels meant to be. Our lips forge together. Our heartbeats synch up. With every response, I sense her need as if it's my own.

Jesus, I've never thought anything that sensitive about a lover in my life. Unfamiliar feelings keep pelting me. What

the hell is going on?

Is this being in love?

That possibility should terrify me. Instead, I'm addicted. I want more.

Slanting my lips over hers again, I meld our mouths together, gratified when she melts and moans into mine. It feeds the beast inside me, determined to sate this fucking hunger and gorge on her for as long as she'll let me. Corinne takes every lash of my tongue with greedy acceptance.

The urge to map her body is inescapable, so I start with my hands, exploring her velvety-soft back, down to the pert, firm globes of her ass. I cup and pinch her flesh as I lift her to my cock and rub against her like I'm marking my territory. She gasps into our kiss again, wrapping her legs around me like she never wants to let me go.

Fuck, I can't wait anymore.

With an impatient sweep of my arm, I knock the pillows off the massive bed. Then I lay her across the mattress and rip the triangle of lace from her body, baring her to me. But shadows impair my vision and cock-block my view, so I flip on a bedside lamp.

And I gape mutely.

She's like a fucking buffet spread out before me. If I thought Corinne was beautiful before, that's nothing compared to the way she fascinates me now. She's plump and ripe. A neat dusting of hair and clenched thighs hide her secrets from me. I need to know them all. I'll keep at her until each and every one of them is mine.

"Spread your legs."

She hesitates. I bite back impatience and scramble for a nicer way to insist she give me the most sensitive, female part of her body. Finally, Corinne bends her knees, settling her feet flat on the mattress, and slowly opens herself like the petals of a flower at first bloom.

My legs turn weak.

“Princess...” I whisper raggedly.

“Do something. I feel so naked. My heart is pounding...” She lifts a shaking hand to her rising-and-falling chest.

“You’re not the only one who’s naked.” I don’t merely mean physically, but admitting that makes me feel too exposed. It’s much less daunting to drop my pants and stalk toward her, not wearing a stitch.

Her stare drops to my cock. She freezes, blinks, then looks back up at me. “No wonder you have a reputation as a manwhore.”

“Don’t bring anyone else into the bedroom with us.” I lower my hands on either side of her body and hover above her. “Tonight isn’t about anything except you and me and the desire we feel.”

“You’re right. I’m a lot less nervous when you’re kissing me.”

Does she understand what she’s inviting? “The second I get on top of you, I’m going to single-mindedly do whatever it takes to make you beg for me.”

“Isn’t it clear that I’m already begging?”

A fresh wave of lust roars through me, making me sweat. “You said you wanted your first time to be special. I’m trying to go slow, be gentle.”

“I don’t want you to hold back. You’ll still make me feel good, right?”

Swallowing back a groan, I nod. “You have no idea.”

“Then show me.” Her fingers part her folds, drag through her slick sex, and touch her sensitive bud with a gasp. “My whole body is on fire. I’ve never wanted anything this badly.”

I’ve never wanted anything—anyone—this badly, either.

With the part of my brain still thinking responsibly, I dip into my pants pocket to retrieve the handful of condoms I keep stashed there for an emergency. I toss them on the bed above

her head, then grab the hand between her legs, climb on top of her, and suck her fingers into my mouth.

Her flavor explodes on my tongue—raw and tart with a hint of sweet. That smell I’ve scented on her since our first meeting is dizzyingly strong here. Everything about her makes me hungry and out of control.

With a growl, I lie on top of her, slant my mouth over hers, and kiss her until neither of us can breathe. Fuck, I can’t get close enough. I can’t touch her enough. I’m goddamn melting.

Settling my hips into the cradle of her thighs, I grip her. It takes all my restraint not to drive myself inside her, protection be damned, and take her bare and raw, the way I’ve never taken any woman.

I don’t. Instead, I set about giving her the pleasure she’s asked for, drifting my lips across her jaw, where I nip on her lobe and make her shudder, before kissing my way down her neck. Then I slide my parted lips over the outside curve of her breast. My hand follows, taking hold of her and squeezing. Her nipple fills my hovering mouth.

“Xavian.” Corinne shudders under me, digging her fingers into my hair to keep me at her breast.

I’m only too happy to oblige, licking and nipping, pinching and lapping at the hard tip until her breathing is out of control.

Fuck, she smells like a fantasy, like those panties I shoved to my nose as I masturbated to thoughts of her last night. But being this close to Corinne... Any satisfaction I achieved at my own hand is gone. All I want is to inhale her and experience her. To feel her close around me and know, in that moment, that she’s all mine.

I lift my head just long enough to get my mouth around her other nipple. It’s every bit as hard as the first. As I suck her in, she lets out a moan. Then I inhale her scent again. My head starts to float away. She’s like the headiest of drugs. I need another hit.

My free hand torments her other breast, its turgid tip still wet from my ministrations. The evidence that I’ve defiled her

drives a primal urge inside me. I need to put my stamp on her somehow. I have to leave my mark. I want her to take a shower in the morning and still see me on her body. I want her to feel me there. I want her to want me again.

Corinne lifts her hips restlessly, a moan escaping her throat. “I ache. I feel so empty. I need you. Please...”

The animal in me responds, determined to bury myself deep and fuck her ruthlessly until she cries out my name in back-scratching pleasure. The head up top realizes, no matter how much she writhes and whines, she’s not ready for that.

The head down south has a mind of its own.

Spread. Take. Claim.

Dredging deep for control, I sweep my mouth down her body—a lick of her stomach, a love bite at her hip, a dip of my tongue into her navel...then farther down until I’m exhaling hot and harsh over her pussy.

“Xavian?”

Just a guess, but if she didn’t let any man take her to bed, she’s probably never let one go down on her. And she’s definitely never had one consume her the way I’m about to.

“Put your foot on the nightstand.” I palm her thighs and part them wider, exposing all of her for my stare. So pink. So wet. So pretty... “I’m going to make you scream, princess.”

Slowly, she complies, stretching to place her dainty foot on the edge of the bedside table and spreading her legs wider. Her breath rattles with nerves, with excitement. It matches my ragged exhalations as I lift her hips and press a kiss to her mound. “Don’t move.”

Then patience deserts me. I cover her pussy with my open mouth. She gasps—a sound that contorts into a moan as I drag my tongue through her furrow. I stop at her clit, lingering, tasting, before leveling her with a long, slow caress. Under me, she arches and fists the duvet, her body tensing as her throaty groan fills the air, ratcheting up my desire to something dangerous.

The hint of her essence I licked from her fingers was merely an appetizer. Now I have the whole meal in front of me, a hot, juicy delicacy that's jacking up my need and stripping away any hint of restraint.

Snarling, I suck her sensitive bud deep in my mouth and circle her tiny opening with my finger. Her head falls back. Long, low sounds escape her throat. The animal in me that breathes and lives for her pleasure eats up her sensual torment.

She abandons any pretense of staying still for my feast when her hips wriggle and lift. Her thighs tremble. She tries to wrap her legs around me.

I shove her thighs wider with a warning growl.

Who the fuck am I right now? Usually, I'm all about sharing pleasure, not demanding it. But I need Corinne to feel it and I need to know it's decimating her, too, like my heart will stop beating if she doesn't shatter into a million pieces for me.

Ruthlessly, I lave her clit, my tongue swirling, prodding, and teasing her. Her breaths turn rapid and choppy. Harsh. Somehow I hear it above the roaring of my heart in my ears. My skin feels too tight. My blood flows hot. And my goddamn cock is desperate to be inside her, to feel her close around me as she welcomes me deep.

"Xavian," she pants. "Xavian!"

"Is this going to be better than the orgasms you give yourself?" I can't resist making her admit it. It's crazy and demanding and even a little petty, but I'm not going to let up until she gives herself over. When Corinne thinks of pleasure, I want her to think of me.

"Yes," she breathes out, voice shaky.

It's not enough.

I grab her wrists and pin them to the mattress beside her hips, then use them to pull her down onto my mouth, where there's no escaping the lash of my tongue.

Eating at her like a man starved, I'm gratified when her moans turn to whimpers. In seconds, she's thrusting herself onto my tongue with a back-twisting arch and a keening cry. Bit by bit, she's giving herself over to pleasure—to me—but I'm a greedy son of a bitch. I want her complete surrender. I want her coming for me like she never has, my name falling from her lips.

Relentlessly, I work her clit over and over until her every breath is a gasp, until her nipples stab the air, until she's jerking reflexively against my tongue.

“Who's going to make you come, princess?” I demand against her hot, humid flesh. “Scream it.”

Her hips buck. Her breaths saw. Then she lets out a piercing wail. “Xavian!”

Her acknowledgment that I'm the master of her destruction dismantles whatever's been holding my restraint together. Everything primal inside me takes over, eating her until I've wrung every last scream, shudder, and sigh from her.

When she finally stills, she lifts her long lashes from her cheeks and stares at me with hot, glittering eyes. The smile that turns up her lips is loopy. “Wow.”

I grin. “Glad to know this orgasm lived up to your standards.”

Her flush deepens. “The one at the restaurant did, too. I just felt so vulnerable afterward, I had to say something to level the playing field.”

“So you can't give yourself better?”

“Goodness, no. Then again, I'm sure it's because you surpass any silly fantasy I might dream up. You're real.”

I reach for a condom above her head. “I am. And so is my need. For the record, princess? I have a feeling you're about to unravel me in a way I've never experienced. It's terrifying. And I stopped giving a fuck a while ago.”

“Xavian...” Her face softens as she sits up, presumably to comfort me.

I loom over her body and push her flat again, then rip into the foil packet. “You really trying to make me feel better?”

“Of course.” She caresses my chest as I roll on the condom.

Once I’m finished, I link her fingers with mine. Then I do the same with the other hand, urge both above her head, and slide my cock against her wet opening. “Or hoping to undo me?”

Corinne bites her lip. The excitement that lights her eyes tells me she loves that idea. “Maybe a little.”

“You want power over me.”

She shakes her head. “I want to matter to you.”

“You do.” God help me, too fucking much.

I’ve already said more than I should, so I cover her lips with mine, penetrating her mouth as I nudge my crest inside her opening.

Beneath me, she tenses. I hear her, breathing hard. With excitement? In panic?

It’s going to hurt me if she tells me what I don’t want to hear, but... “Are you sure about this?”

She doesn’t hesitate. “Yes. I want you.”

I close my eyes in both relief and torment. I’m fucking glad, but I’m like an addict about to stick a needle into my vein. I know it will probably be my ruin, but the high will be so worth it.

“Squeeze my hands and keep your thighs spread.”

Corinne nods, her stare clinging. I’m going to cause her pain before I make her feel all kinds of good, and she’s still looking at me like I’m her salvation. It feeds something bent in me.

Every instinct I have yells at me to thrust deep and claim her in one unrelenting stroke. Instead, I ease inside her inch by torturously slow inch, pushing through her barrier.

She yelps, eyes widening, and tries to squirm away. I hold her still with my body and press forward. “Deep breaths.”

Corinne complies, then exhales with a little whine, her face twisting. “It stings and burns.”

“I know.” And I can’t stop it. “I’m sorry.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t apologize. Just give me more.”

Did I hear that right? “You’re sure?”

“Yes,” she breathes. “Because it’s you. And I want to get to the good part.”

“It’s all going to be good in just a minute. Breathe again.”

She exhales, releasing some of her tension.

“Good. Hold on to me.” I tighten my grip on her hands. As she squeezes back, I brace myself and surge inside her, sinking down in one slick, snug, shocking glide to the hilt.

And I let out a long groan that blends with hers.

Holy shit. Mind blown.

Corinne feels custom-made for me. Way better than any woman in memory. Even better than my fantasy.

Perfect.

“Oh, princess.” I grind into her as deep as I can and toss back my head. A shudder slides through me.

“That feels”—her breath catches—“good.”

Huge fucking understatement. Fire ignites my veins. I’ve never felt desire this urgent. And when she tilts her hips up, I slide even deeper and discover another layer of pleasure. The insane sensation has my eyes rolling to the back of my head.

I need more of her.

Squeezing her hands, I draw back, then tunnel my way into her again. Pleasure burns even hotter, scorching through my veins to every corner in my body. My bones threaten to melt. An inferno settles low and deep—a greedy, consuming lust I can’t ignore or fight.

Under me, she wraps her legs around me, rocking to my rhythm and rising up to meet every thrust with a breathy cry that only jacks up my desire more. My skin sizzles. Climax is coming fast, its anticipation a burn so sweet I can taste it.

Fuck, I have to get control of myself. I refuse to be the only one swallowed up by this passion.

I focus on her reactions so I can undo her until she screams out my name in surrender. But watching her face while I fuck her with one deep, relentless stroke after another only unwinds me faster. Corinne is a visual temptation I can't resist. Her sooty lashes flutter over dilated eyes, soft with need above her flushed cheeks. Her plump lips part, seemingly swollen and bruised from my kisses. She pants and wails. The sounds hang in the air, buzz in my ears, and fray the tenuous hold on my self-control.

“Corinne,” I gasp out before I seize her mouth, nudging her lips apart and delving deep. She's with me—every second, every breath, grabbing at my hands and rising up to me.

She's burning me alive.

Tearing my mouth free, I transfer both of her wrists, still pinned to the mattress, into one hand. The other I tangle in her hair and tug. The arch of her milky throat beckons. I nip my way down her neck, then settle my face into the crook, where that deliciously feminine scent of hers only adds fuel to my flames.

“Fuck,” I pant. “Oh, fuck. Princess...”

Corinne struggles to free her hands while meeting me thrust for thrust. “Let me touch you.”

Instinct compels me to shake my head and hold tighter. I can't let her break me down any faster. I'm already losing control.

Besides, I can put my hands to better use.

Cursing, I pull free from her snug clasp, sit back on my heels, then flip her onto her stomach. With my knees, I spread her legs again, then cover her back with my body, shoving myself inside the haven of her pussy in one desperate thrust.

She cries out, a sound between surprise and desire.
“Xavian...”

With one hand, I grab her hip and, teeth bared, drill down into her as deep as I can. The other I wrap around her hair and tug until she moans. “Take me.”

“Yes. I want you. All of you...”

I bury my face in her neck. “Feel how hard I am? How much I want you?”

“Yes. It’s so good.”

It fucking is. “You’re close. I feel you.”

Another gasp escapes her as she grips the sheets in her grasping fingers. “Yes.”

I slide my hand from her hair and tuck it under her body, feeling her breast, skimming down her stomach, then settling over her clit, and rub.

Her whole body tenses. Her breath catches.

“Come for me,” I demand.

“Yes. Yes!”

She tightens. My blood pumps and surges. Pressure builds. Pleasure ramps up. Her stiff bud swells. My triumph soars. Almost there...

“That’s it, princess. So hot. So tight...” I hiss out. “Give me your pleasure. Scream for me.”

Corinne pants once, twice. Her breath stopping. Her body seizing. Her pussy clamping down. “Oh. Oh...”

“Now,” I growl, surging and banging deep inside her, ecstasy pooling and building until I swear it’s going to destroy me.

“Xavian!”

She comes apart, jerking and shuddering, as she keens out in long, low-throated pleasure that pings off the walls and echoes from the floors. It fuels everything filthy, reckless, and possessive inside me as I grip her hip mercilessly and crash

into her one last time before liquid ecstasy, unlike anything I've ever felt, shoots through my body, exploding my brain and burning away all my barriers. I shudder, pouring everything into Corinne until there's nothing left but her—her skin, her scent, her sweat, her sweltering heat singeing me as I cry out her name, then sink my mouth onto the crook of her shoulder, biting down and I ride out the last of the orgasm that guts me.

When it's over, I roll away, panting hard, and blink at the ceiling.

Holy. Fucking. Shit. What was that? It was too deep to be mere sex. It was too dirty to be strictly making love.

It was a taking. It was a claiming.

It was you forgetting that everything between you two is supposed to be an act, dumb ass.

In my head, I hear Maxon telling me again that I'm fucked. He's right.

What the hell am I going to do?

I exhale, shocked when Corinne appears above me, red-faced and spent, pressing her lips to my shoulder, my jaw, and my mouth, then sinking beside me with a satisfied sigh.

Because I'm a greedy bastard with no intention of letting her go, I wrap my arms around her and lay her on top of me, kissing her thoroughly.

"Xavian?" she asks when we come up for air.

"Yeah." I play cool, but I'm braced to hear she already regrets me or she intends to leave.

Instead, she smiles. "That was...amazing. When can we do that again?"



For the third time, I roll away from Corinne, sweaty and spent. But not satisfied. I'm beginning to think I'll never get enough

of her. For now, I'm at the end of my strength.

"Oh, my gosh." She pants. "What are you doing to me?"

Making sure you never want to spend another night without me.

But that thought is dangerous. Voicing it is even riskier. Despite my foolish hopes, there's almost no way she stays.

And when she leaves, I'm pretty sure she'll shatter my heart.

I have no fucking idea how to handle this.

"What are you doing to me?" I counter. "You wrung me inside out, princess. I just wanted to return the favor."

"Oh, you did." She sits up, wincing.

"Sore?"

"Yeah."

That's no shock. I've spent hours inside her. I should apologize and back the fuck off while her untried body recovers. But I'm a fucking bastard because I'm not going to do either of those things until I'm sure I've imprinted myself on her in some permanent way.

If she leaves me in the end, I'll make damn sure at least a part of her heart remains mine.

And what about that revenge you wanted so badly a few days ago?

Right now, I'm finding it hard to care.

I wrap an arm around Corinne's waist and haul her back against me. "I'll kiss your pussy and make it better."

"Again?" Corinne breaks away, blushing. "You have to let me stand and stretch. You've kept my legs spread for so long I'm stiff."

I grin. "I'm not even a little bit sorry."

She smiles back as she stands and raises her hands above her head, unabashedly displaying every naked inch of her body. "I didn't think you would be."

Fascinated, I watch as she stretches her calves, quads, and hamstrings, circling her ankles and rolling her neck. Everywhere I look, she's gracefully curved and lush. She's not one of those women whose clothes hang off of them like a coat hanger because she's in desperate need of a cheeseburger. She fills out everything perfectly, especially my hands.

Inevitably, I'm lured to her nipples, drawn tight and red after my dedicated attention. Her peach of a pussy is beyond swollen and sugary slick. I can't stop staring at the shadowy cleft, imagining my tongue there again. My cock stirs and stands, making me question whether round four is truly a bad idea.

She catches sight of my reaction, and her eyes go wide. "Seriously?"

"I warned you that I have a very active sex drive." But the intensity of this desire is insane, even for me.

"You did. I'm not complaining. I just need a minute. And maybe a little conversation." She slides back into bed, curling up beside me as if there's no place she'd rather be.

Snuggling has long been a fuck-no for me. It encourages a closeness I don't typically want and it engenders feelings in women I later have to quash. But after a trio of spectacular orgasms, I still want to be close to Corinne. I want her to want me even more.

For the first time since Hadley, I desire a woman for more than sex. I don't know how to handle that since we're probably doomed. But my sex drive has other ideas.

I wrap my arm around her and bring her against my body, spooning her. My lips wander up her nape. My hard cock prods her luscious ass. "Princess..."

She sighs happily when my finger circles her nipple. "Are you always this way with women?"

"What way?"

"Attentive. Affectionate."

Being honest is scary, but I'm too fucking knotted up to play games and I'd rather not lie. "No."

She turns to me with a frown. "So you really just..."

"Hit it and quit it? Usually."

"So why bother holding me now? We're temporary. If you think I need extra tenderness because I'm new to having sex, I appreciate the kindness, but you don't have to pretend with me."

Is Corinne saying she doesn't want me to touch her anymore? I'm not okay with that. "You agreed to my terms. Sex with you for the duration of our 'engagement.'"

"This isn't sex, and we didn't negotiate cuddling."

"Are you telling me I can fuck you but I can't hold you? If you are, I have ways of making you say yes. And I'm not above using them." I pin her to her back and roll her beneath me, hooking my finger under her chin until she meets my stare. "What's the problem?"

She bites her lip, looking so vulnerable. "This is a lot of intimacy for me. I'm so used to being alone..."

So it's not me she's rejecting? "You shouldn't be."

"Until tonight, I was resigned to the idea that I wasn't wildly exciting to any man. Obviously, I didn't have sex with anyone in my past, so it's not like I know what it might have been like, but no one I dated seemed terribly bothered that I wanted to wait. So how much could they have actually wanted me? But you..."

"I want you. Very much."

"I can't figure out why...except revenge."

"I'm not in bed with you to get back at your brother, princess. And I really fucking hope you didn't get naked with me simply to get your hands on your inheritance." The warning note in my voice should tell her how much that would piss me off.

“No, but I assumed the unspoken part of our agreement was that I wouldn’t catch feelings for you.”

Normally, her feelings are the last thing I’d want. But with her pressed against me and her lips drifting softly against my chest? I close my eyes, and it’s too easy to picture us like this next week, next month, in the next decade. Hell, in this life and the next. Yeah, my stupid heart is ready to go there.

Fuck, I really think I’m in love. I’m probably going to crash and burn—but I’m going to go down fighting for Corinne.

“I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want you,” I admit.

She sucks in a shocked breath. “Except Hadley, right?”

I’m going to shock her again. “No. I want you more.”

“But you two were engaged for real.” She blinks at me, stunned. “I don’t…”

“Understand?” There are a million reasons. “You’re funny. You’re dedicated. And you’re genuine. Despite our scheme, you don’t play head games. You actually care about the people in your life, even if they’ve been less than kind to you. I admire that. It’s not in my genetic makeup.”

She looks stunned. “You don’t think it’s weak?”

“To have a heart? No. Hell, it probably makes you stronger than most. You know people you’ve invested in might someday let you down, but you’re still there for them. You still give them the benefit of the doubt. You still open up.”

“I always thought caring too much was one of my faults.”

“You’re wrong.” I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “It’s one of your best qualities.”

“Am I anything like Hadley?”

Why does she want to know? To see how she measures up?

“No.” When she frowns, I reassure her. “That’s a good thing, princess. Hadley always put Hadley first. Even at her most open, she was guarded. She rarely gave anyone her

warmth or honesty unless she wanted something. Affection and sex were things she doled out to change a conversation or get her way.”

“Why? I can’t imagine being so...calculating.”

The Corinne I’ve come to know isn’t capable of that. That’s part of why I’m falling hard for her. “Hadley had reasons. I understood them, but that meant we saw commitment very differently. I didn’t realize that until it was too late.”

Corinne comforts me with a soft stroke. “I’m sorry.”

“My fault.”

“But you’re not the kind of man to let himself be manipulated like that, unless...” She frowns. “She must have been very beautiful.”

“She was, but that wasn’t why I made excuses for her behavior. She’d had a rough childhood. We both came from nowhere and we were determined to make something of our lives, no matter what. I thought we’d scratch our way to the top together. I helped and protected her as much as I could because I believed she would be there for me, too. That’s also why I proposed. Turns out, her idea of getting ahead was jumping ship as soon as she got a better offer.”

“I thought she simply intended to marry well all along.”

I shake my head. “When we first got together, she planned to take the fashion world by storm. She was forever sketching this and that. God, her sewing in the middle of the night when she couldn’t sleep drove me nuts. That fucking machine woke me up more often than not...” I shake my head. “But she wasn’t good at math. Her junior year, she was taking trig for the second time. I tried to help her, but halfway through the semester, she knew she wasn’t going to pass. She also knew she was going to lose her scholarship. She panicked and found her Plan B in Parker. In a way, I get it. My mom barely made ends meet, but I never wondered as a child where my next meal was coming from. She did—a lot. That terrified her,

understandably. But I can't forgive or absolve her for cheating."

"When you found out, I can only imagine how much it hurt. You loved her."

"I did." As much as I was capable at the time. And because she gave amazing head. My twenty-one-year-old self thought that was critical. "But since she felt zero remorse in leaving me for your brother, I realized she never loved me."

Corinne's face softens. "Her loss is my gain. After all, if you were married now, you wouldn't be the perfect fake fiancé."

"After tonight, don't you think we're more than that?"

Her lips part. She stares mutely, blinking.

Is she trying to find the words to let me down gently? Probably. She's going back to LA and she's always going to be Parker's sister. I'm an idiot for hoping my feelings matter. I've never been good enough before. Why should I be enough for this princess? Hell, I should just be happy she didn't lie to me first.

"Never mind." I fling myself off the bed. "I'll be back. I need to make sure the cleaning crew did their job."

"At four in the morning?" She lunges for my hand and grips tight. "Don't go. I didn't mean to upset you."

"Forget it." I reach for my clothes.

She squeezes my fingers tighter. "Let's talk this out."

"There's nothing to say."

"Obviously, there is. You caught me off guard. Give me a minute—"

"It doesn't matter."

"It does! You just told me how emotionally brave you think I am. But I'm not when it comes to you. After tonight, it feels like we're way more than co-conspirators. I didn't want to admit that out loud. Given how fast you go through women, I didn't expect you to..."

“Want you beyond the sex? Even after I’ve said I do?”

She nods. “I was afraid to cling or make you regret helping me. But I have feelings for you I told myself I shouldn’t. I’ve worried I would drive you away by being the silly little virgin who can’t distinguish a good time from something more. Besides, for us to have any kind of future...I would have to be more important to you than revenge. After what my brother has done, I can’t ask that of you.”

Is she serious? If I had to choose between Corinne and stabbing Parker in the back? No contest.

But none of that matters unless her feelings are anywhere close to love.

“Since I also have to figure out how to save my business, we need to continue with our scheme until my brother hands over my money. So I’m afraid of blurring the line between fantasy and reality.” She presses her lips together. “I’m not ready to get my heart crushed again.”

With a sigh, I sit on the edge of the bed. Do I tell her what I know? “I’m not sure what changed, but Riley was going to propose to you. Financial records indicate he bought you an engagement ring. A week later, he returned it. The next day, he called you and broke things off.”

Corinne gapes at me. “How do you know that?”

“After you first came to my office, I hired a PI to look into you. I needed to know how much of your story was true so I could tell if your proposal was serious or if your brother had sent you to take me down.”

“And what did you find?” She’s clearly pissed.

“That you were being honest. Look, the day I hired Owen, it was nothing personal. But I thought that knowing Riley had been serious about you might help.”

She shakes her head. “It just leaves me with more questions. We didn’t fight. He said he just didn’t want to do the long-distance thing anymore. And that I wasn’t what he wanted after all.”

“And you took that to mean you weren’t good enough?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

She’s got a point. “It reinforced your belief that everyone leaves you.”

Biting her lip, Corinne looks away. “Yes.”

I would tell her that I’ll continue being here for her, but is she ready to hear it? Instinct tells me she’ll only believe me when she sees it. So I have to prove I’ve got her back. I’ll have to find the right opportunity. And if I can’t...I’m ruthless enough to make my own.

Until then, I know one way to keep her dialed into me.

“Come here.” I reach for a condom and lift her onto me until she’s straddling my lap.

Automatically, she grabs my shoulders. “What are you doing?”

“Like you mentioned, we didn’t negotiate cuddling; we negotiated sex.” I rip into the packet, then roll it on before lifting her onto my stiff cock and easing her down, reveling in her hiss and her wet pussy closing around me. I position my lips against hers. “I’m just living up to my end of the bargain.”

chapter NINE

After more sex Sunday morning, followed by a relaxing brunch with the Reed clan, where Corinne fit in perfectly, we took Echo and Hayes to the airport that evening with promises to visit before wedding prep gets too crazy.

It's a promise I don't know how to keep, and I hate lying to my best friends.

On our way back to my place, Harlow called to say that she, Masey, and Britta had freed up a few hours in the morning to help my "fiancée" clear up her clerical backlog. Corinne seemed genuinely touched and thanked the trio profusely. Her gorgeous smile—and every other sexy part of her—made me want to seduce my way into her panties again. And bless my family for accepting her the way they embraced me when I was a stranger who happened to share their blood.

But in the back of my mind, worry keeps brewing like a coffeepot with no off switch. How will I explain our breakup to everyone if I can't persuade Corinne to stay? Sure, I'm determined to do whatever I can to make this work. Failure isn't an option and all that...but I'm a realist. I have maybe a fifty-fifty shot.

Coupled with another shitty-market Monday, I've got a lot on my mind. Worse, my phone, which was fairly quiet yesterday, started blowing up this morning, in the middle of a call with a jittery client. If the fucking paparazzi is back on my case, I'm going to be hard-pressed not to throttle Parker.

Speaking of which, where is the bastard hiding? He's been too quiet since Saturday night. I know better than to think he flew to the island in the middle of his big movie-premier weekend to berate me, then shrugged off failure when he couldn't compel his sister to leave with him and return to LA. He's somewhere, plotting something devious.

“You’re sure, Xavian?” asks my clients, a kind fifty-something couple from Palm Springs.

“I can’t give you a guarantee where the market is concerned. What I know is that any weakness in the tech and medical sectors tends to be short-lived, compared to, say, retail or housing, which are much more dependent on the economy. If you’re willing to be aggressive, overseas returns can be great. But it’s more speculative. This is really about you two and your risk tolerance. Given your age and financial situation, you don’t have to gamble at all unless you’re looking to grow above, say, six percent.” In their silence, I decide to throw a curveball into the mix. I haven’t officially linked up with Maxon and Griff yet, but... “Unless you want to veer into real estate. You’ve expressed an interest in the past in Hawaii, and I’m in contact with the two most successful agents in Maui. They’re top one percent in the state. If you want tangible assets that increase in value over time—and a great place to vacation or rental income—I can put you in touch with them.”

Don and Jeanine Hillard talk for a few more minutes and ask some questions, which I answer with ease. I’ve rehearsed this pitch in my sleep. They want to talk with Maxon and Griff, so I tell the couple they’ll be in touch. Once I recap the adjustments to their portfolio we’ve agreed to, they end the call.

Before I can even take a sip of coffee, my phone vibrates in my hand. A glance at the screen tells me it’s the more outspoken of my sisters. Being married to a super-alpha football god has done zero to tamp down her attitude. It’s one reason I love her.

“Hey, Harlow. How’s it going?”

The background noise tells me she’s in the car. “Fantastic! Masey, Britta, and I just left your place.”

I glance at my watch. “It’s only eleven thirty.”

“We’re efficient, especially Britta.”

True. “So Corinne isn’t drowning anymore?”

“Not in administrative work. Britta handled all the customer inquiries. Masey prepped everything for mailing. Since she works with makeup—also delicate stuff—she knows how to protect the merchandise from the USPS. She even taught Corinne a thing or two.”

“Perfect. What did you do?”

“What I do best.”

“She didn’t need you stirring the pot,” I tease.

Harlow tsks. “You’re a horrible brother. Just for that, I’m going to tell her all your most embarrassing stories.”

That’s not an idle threat. Still, I laugh. “You will anyway.”

“You’re right. Actually, I talked your girl off the ledge, poor thing. She was about to hyperventilate.”

“Why? What happened?” Corinne was asleep when I left for the office earlier. “Did Parker call?”

“Thankfully, no. And she wasn’t upset, just shocked. When she opened her emails this morning, she had hundreds of new orders—on top of her existing backlog. Apparently, the photos of your dinner Friday night and the engagement pic you posted Saturday also featured her watch band. It turned out to be sales gold.”

“I know she wasn’t planning on an avalanche of new orders, but it’s a good problem to have.”

“Absolutely.” Harlow hesitates. “Honestly, when I first met Corinne, I wasn’t sure about her. She was so quiet—something you’re not—and I thought you would run her over with your...ahem, sparkling Reed personality. Plus, she was nothing like your usual skanks.”

“Skanks? Are you disparaging your fellow womankind? What about sexual equality and all that?”

“Oh, I’m not slut-shaming any woman who pursues a man she wants, even for a night. I say, *Go get him, girl!* If I didn’t, I’d have to castigate myself hard for my college years.”

The thought of my sister and sex in the same sentence makes me wince. “TMI.”

She laughs. “I just meant some of those women you slept with during what I guess were your off periods with Corinne weren’t... What’s a nice way to put this? They didn’t have their shit together. They weren’t smart or ambitious. They didn’t seem like they were going anywhere in life. This morning proved Corinne is nothing like that. She was a total boss bitch. She knows her operation inside and out, she has tons of ideas for expansion, and she’s thinking big. Her business plan is impeccable. We were all impressed. And super glad you don’t actually have horrible taste in women, like we thought.”

I’m not surprised by Harlow’s summation. Corinne is amazing. “Wow, thanks for having such confidence in me.”

“Oh, you’re amazing with money and you might be my spirit animal since you’re also super sarcastic, but your choice in women... Let’s just say Corinne is a huge upgrade. She’s the gold standard. Don’t let her get away.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” I quip, trying not to think about how real that possibility is.

“I’m sure you know this, but Parker is going to be trouble. And I doubt he appreciated the reports that surfaced last night, hinting that he wasn’t the victim in his story after all.”

Holy shit. “Where? Who said that?”

“You didn’t hear?”

“Corinne and I were busy last night.”

After our airport run, we settled back at my place for a pizza and a bottle of wine. She’d planned to work, but I persuaded her we needed an early turn-in. I did my best to keep my cock out of her, but I slipped up once. My tongue, however, was another story...

She was sleeping too peacefully this morning for me to wake her up so I could go to pound town. I was hard as fuck until I got to the office and focused on work, but I can live with that. I was just glad to wake up beside her.

If that doesn't sound like a guy in love, I have no idea what does.

"You're not even married yet and already acting like newlyweds," she jokes.

"You can't tell me you and Noah weren't busy before you said I do."

"We totally were. That's why I was already pregnant when we exchanged vows. But he still gets a kick out of knocking me up."

"Really...that's just so much TMI."

"Oops," she murmurs without sounding contrite at all. "Anyway, the reporters who attended your engagement party put out the word. People are talking."

Shit. I didn't see that coming. "But their beat is sports."

"Doesn't matter. You two are big news."

I sigh, hoping like hell Corinne is prepared for her brother's BS, because it's coming. Then again... "If it's in the sports pages, Parker won't see it." He's not a jock by any definition. "So that's a plus."

"You really are out of the loop. The guys who came on Saturday didn't report it to their fans. None of them would have given a crap, especially with college football season about to kick off. But they passed the info on to celeb and pop culture peeps. The possibility that Parker isn't that innocent made TMZ. Lots of speculation out there now..."

He won't take that lying down. "Damn it."

"Sorry. If it's any consolation, Noah called the reporters early this morning and laid into them for not running the story past him first." She pauses. "He figured if you weren't spilling your past with Hadley—was that her name?—to the public, there was a reason."

Yes. Too bad that doesn't help. "Tell him I appreciate him trying."

"What are you going to do? What's your move?"

Good question. If it was merely a feud between Parker and me, I would hunt the motherfucker down and confront him with the video Lisa took of the asshole admitting he fucked my former fiancé. I'd threaten to spread it everywhere unless he shut the hell up and left me alone. But with Corinne in the picture, that's not an option. I may be spit-balling here, but I doubt she'd be okay with airing all her dirty laundry to the world. And the things Parker said to her were filthy. Horrible. Demeaning. Despite her brother being the bad guy in this scenario, he's still her brother. She doesn't want to hurt him, just get him to release her money from his controlling fist.

"I'm working on it." But Corinne and I clearly need to talk more.

It's my bad that I kept her too busy last night for anything resembling conversation. We especially haven't talked more about what's happening between us. The minute we were alone again, I kissed her and we both went up in flames. Other than breaks for food and showers, last night was a repeat of Saturday.

Which reminds me... I've blown through my condom stash. I'll need to stop at the store or Corinne will be pregnant in two point two seconds.

That notion gets me instantly hard—and not for the first time. Admittedly, the idea has primal appeal. We're supposed to be temporary, but no part of my body is acting that way, especially my heart.

"If you intend to change the narrative, figure it out fast. You don't have a lot of time. Hollywood loves to build someone up only to tear them down, and Parker is especially vulnerable since the movie wasn't as warmly received as the book. To a bunch of the filmgoers, he came off like a whining bastard. The film's Rotten Tomatoes score reflects that."

It's more accurate to say he's a narcissistic asshole, but I'm splitting hairs. "Thanks for the heads-up."

"Sure. If you need any help, let me know. Of all your siblings, I'm the most devious."

“I think Maxon and Griff could give you a run for your money.” Evan is too straightforward, Bethany isn’t the underhanded type, and our youngest sibling, Oliver, is only five, so the verdict is still out on him.

“Pfft. They’re amateurs.”

Not true, but I laugh. “Thanks for helping Corinne.”

“It was a pleasure. We’re happy to pitch in again if it keeps her sane.”

“I’m sure she appreciated it.”

“It’s none of my business, but is there a reason you don’t want the press to denigrate Parker? If you can discredit your adversary and not have to do any of the bad-mouthing yourself, I’d call that a win-win.”

“I just don’t want to upset Corinne if I can avoid it. She was pissed at her brother on Saturday night...but they’re family.”

“You’re in a tough spot.”

“I’ll take her some lunch and we’ll talk it over, come up with a solution.” Besides, I’m itching to see her. After we figure out a strategy to deal with Parker, maybe we can get horizontal.

“I don’t think she’ll be there. She got a call as we were leaving. She didn’t say from who, but I got the impression she’s already got a lunch date. Does she know anyone on the island?”

Not that I know of. If it’s not Parker, who the fuck would be taking her out? “I better go.”



I call Corinne. No answer. The cycle repeats over the next hour and a half. I force myself to stay on task for an account review with some of Bethany’s clients on Oahu, but the second it’s over, I ring Corinne again.

She's still not picking up. Who did she go to lunch with? Why isn't she answering?

While worry creeps in, my phone suddenly blows up, buzzing like a never-ending chainsaw. Texts from unknown numbers, followed by phone call after phone call, all of which I decline because none of them are from Corinne. What the hell is going on? I didn't think paparazzi were strictly Monday-through-Friday people. Why did they wait until today to bug the shit out of me? It's just after noon, and I'm wishing this workday was over.

Because you're fixated on Corinne.

"Mr. Costa?" Lisa calls, bursting into my office, worry stamped all over her face.

"What's wrong?"

She opens her mouth, then frowns. "Maybe nothing."

"Let me be the judge."

Before she can elaborate, my phone rings again. It's Maxon. Since he almost never calls me at work, something is definitely up.

I grab the device. "What the fuck is going on?"

"You tell me. Did you and Corinne fight? Break up?"

Why would he ask that? "No."

At least not that I know of. She can't possibly be mad at the note I penned her before I left, telling her to make herself at home and where to find the keys to the SUV if she really needed to go out, which I didn't recommend her doing alone, given the ugly gossip and her brother lurking in the shadows.

"Well, all of social media is questioning whether you're still engaged because she's with her ex right now."

I freeze. That's who she's having lunch with? "Riley Stephens is on the island? And they're together?"

"So you didn't know about this?"

“Nothing,” I bite out. If I had, I would have persuaded her to stay away from him or insisted she take me with her.

Corinne hasn’t seen this douchebag in how long and now that she’s “engaged,” he’s up in her business again?

“Get on that,” Maxon recommends. “Image-wise, it doesn’t look good. And I don’t want her to hurt you.”

That doesn’t exactly calm me. “They’re that cozy?”

“I’m not there, but the pictures suggest...”

Fuck. Why would she even see him, much less get romantic after the way he burned her? She just said last night that she didn’t want to get her heart broken again. Corinne having lunch with him now doesn’t make sense. I know social media can lie, so I won’t jump to conclusions or assume the worst. That woman feels something for me. I know it. I feel it in her touch. She’s not the kind of woman to give her virginity to me, then thirty-six hours later get frisky with the fucker who left her.

“Where are they?”

“If you go marching in there, that will look worse, like you didn’t know and that she’s cheating—”

I don’t care. “Where the fuck are they?”

He rattles off the name of a restaurant I know of vaguely but have never frequented. “But to be clear, the pictures I’ve seen...they’re talking. Just talking. So maybe their heads bent together looks more damning than it is.”

And maybe not.

“I’m on it,” I spit out and hang up.

When I look up, Lisa still stands in the doorway, lingering in a rare moment of uncertainty. “What would you like me to do?”

“Cancel my afternoon. Text me with emergencies only. Tell Clint I’ll be back when I can.”

“Of course.” She bustles back to her desk and picks up the phone.

Thank God I can count on her.

My only focus now is reaching Corinne. I'm not sure what the fuck is going on, but I'm going to find out.

As I reach my car, my phone buzzes. It's a text from her.

Do you have a minute to talk?

Where are you? I type back, flinging myself into the front seat of my Audi.

At your place.

I tear out of the parking lot, stare locked on the road. But my thoughts are a million miles away.

This feels too much like Hadley. I was clocking out of my bartending job at three a.m. when I heard the rumors that Parker was still over at our place. By the time I reached our apartment, Hadley was on her knees, sucking his knob. The ensuing blowup was ugly, so while Parker zipped up his pants, Hadley packed her shit and gave me her goodbye speech. It was startlingly unemotional. But that was Hadley. She'd already done the practical calculations. Parker came from money. If she landed him, she'd never go without again.

She didn't see his blindside coming until it was too late. After that...I could never trust her. Or Parker.

Beside me, the phone buzzes incessantly. Paparazzi? More well-meaning family members? I don't give a fuck.

Screeching into the driveway, I park sideways, blocking in the SUV. She's not leaving until we have this out. Then I stomp to the house, slamming my way inside. "Corinne!"

"In here," she answers quietly from the living room, her voice quivering.

My gut torques up. Is she about to tell me to fuck off, too?

I march around the corner and find her sitting on the sofa. There's no freshly fucked glow, repressed smile, or fake contrition on her face. Unlike Hadley that fateful night, Corinne is pale and shaken.

My anger drains out, quickly replaced by concern. I reach her in a handful of steps and crouch in front of her, taking her hands in mine. “Did that bastard hurt you?”

Her gaze bounces to mine. Surprise fills her dark eyes. “You know?”

“That you had lunch with Riley? It’s all over social media.”

She presses a hand over her gaping mouth. “Oh, my gosh... I’m sorry. I didn’t think. I’m used to being nobody and I was so stunned when he called...”

I care less about our scheme and how her luncheon looked to the world than I do about Riley upsetting her. Did she even want to see him?

“When?”

“This morning.” It clicks. He must have been the person calling as Harlow, Masey, and Britta left my place.

“Son of a bitch.”

“I saw his name come up on my phone, and I was shocked. I didn’t think it could truly be him. I hadn’t heard from him in over a year. And suddenly...there he was, calling to tell me he’s on the island for something work-related and that he wants to see me.” She swallows. “To explain and apologize.”

Isn’t the timing really fucking convenient? I’m calling bullshit. Almost no one comes to the island for anything work-related, especially in the financial sector. The fucker works in New York City, the economic capital. What could possibly be on Maui that would further his career? Nothing.

He came here for Corinne.

Because he had another change of heart?

“I tried to reach you for two hours, to find out what the hell was going on. Why didn’t you answer?”

“I-I forgot to charge my phone last night. When he called, I was working. After we hung up, I plugged in my phone in the office and went to shower. I forgot to take it when I left.”

Her story is plausible. I kept her too busy last night to bother with anything practical.

Which begs the question... “Why did you meet him?”

“I wanted closure. I never got it. Or at least I didn’t feel like I did. The excuses he gave me when we broke up didn’t really explain.”

“Did he have a different story today?”

She nods, her brow furrowing as she seems to gather her words. “That he’d gotten scared. He knew I wanted to get married and have children, and he wasn’t ready. He said he didn’t think it was fair to waste my time when he didn’t know how long it would be before he was.”

“And he’s ready now?”

“I didn’t ask.”

“But I’ll bet he gave you some indication.”

She bites her lip. “Not in so many words, but he hinted...”

Of course he did, the fucking bastard.

His story is crap. Or maybe I’m just convinced of that because this fucker seems shady, moving in on Corinne again while she’s “engaged.” He doesn’t know it’s fake. Unless... “Did you tell him our engagement isn’t real?”

That snaps her attention back to me. “Of course not. But he kept asking if I was happy.”

I blanch. “What did you tell him?”

“Very.” She presses her lips together, looking near tears. “You’re obviously angry and—”

“You should have told me you were going to have lunch with this asshole. I could have come with you. We could have created a completely different public narrative. But you waited to tell me until it was over.”

“I apologized for having lunch in public. It was stupid of me. But I wasn’t going to interrupt you at work for my personal stuff.”

Maybe, but I don't think that's the only reason. "You didn't want me to hear your conversation."

She fidgets and looks away. "I didn't. Our breakup was humiliating. I was afraid the explanation would be equally mortifying."

I want to be furious. I want to rip off this son of a bitch's head for hurting her. I want him to stop sniffing around my woman.

But she's not really mine.

And her rationale sounds real. I need to take it down a notch.

"Where did you leave things?"

"He asked me to forgive him. I told him I did and that, if he wasn't ready for marriage, I'm glad he didn't go through the motions and change his mind on our wedding day or something equally awful."

"Did he ask to see you again?"

She hesitates, and I know I'm not going to like her answer before she even opens her mouth. "He said he's on the island indefinitely for a special project and doesn't know a soul, so he hoped we could meet again."

So that's a yes.

Now I'm even more suspicious. Sure, it's possible he heard Corinne planned to marry someone else and realized, if he still wanted her it was now or never. But that scenario feels awfully convenient.

Ever think that's your jealousy talking?

My inner monologue needs to shut the fuck up.

"How did you answer?"

"I said I'd have to think about it. Seeing him was..." She shakes her head. "I don't know how to process it."

I'd really fucking like to know. Did she miss him? Is she still drawn to him? Does she fucking love him?

My agitation isn't helping. I need to calm down. Corinne isn't a player, and I can't let my cynicism run away with my mouth.

"I'm sure it was a lot."

She nods, still seeming slightly off-balance. "I don't know that we could ever be friends."

Because he burned her? Or because she wants more from him?

I quash my urge to ask what fucking hotel he's staying at so I can pay the asshole a visit. That would make me look weak—both on social media and to Corinne. I can't appear threatened.

But something is coming. I feel it.

"Why?" I insist. "Tell me why you can't be friends."

Before she can answer, Lisa's ringtone peals between us. She wouldn't call if it wasn't an emergency.

Cursing, I yank the device from my pocket. "What?"

"You need to do damage control now. Parker Emerson is all over social media, claiming that your engagement is off and that his sister will be marrying Riley Stephens."

chapterTEN

By ten that night, I'm speeding down the highway in my sleek two-seater Audi, gripping the wheel like it's Riley Stephens's throat. The son of a bitch should have stayed in her past.

Beside me, Corinne is quiet, staring pensively through the windshield. She's hotter than I've ever seen her look. Hell, hotter than I've ever seen *any* woman look.

"We're almost there."

She bites her lip. "Is all this really necessary?"

You're fucking right it is.

Gripping the wheel even tighter, I mentally grope for a more measured response. "It's wise to control the narrative. Or your brother will."

"It just feels like we're looking for a fight."

That's not Corinne's nature. I appreciate that about her, and if I could fight this battle alone, I'd be happy to. But tonight is one instance where we can't let bygones be bygones. If we're going to control the story about who Corinne is marrying, we have to do it together.

Parker is spreading lies, and the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced he's behind Riley's sudden reappearance. What I don't know is if Corinne's ex is a co-conspirator or an unwitting accomplice. Whatever. Fuck them both. Parker is hoping to break us up.

I'm going to do everything in my power to shut him down.

No one is taking Corinne from me. This has nothing to do with revenge and everything to do with holding on to my woman.

There, I admitted it. Corinne Emerson belongs to me.

Now I have to convince her that what I feel is real and that there's something potentially lasting between us.

“All we need to do tonight is drink, dance, and have a good time. You don't have to say anything. You don't have to confront anyone.” If any of that needs doing, I'll handle it.

“And I appreciate that, but all this effort just to go out... And the reporters?”

After Lisa laid the bad news on me, I called Maxon and Griff to discuss strategy. I knew my oldest brothers were underhanded, but damn... Their impressively ruthless sides came out and they weren't playing. I'm fully on board.

Then Harlow saw Parker's “announcement” online and started fuming. She and Britta, both impeccable dressers, frequent the same upscale clothing store. My sister called the owner, Jennifer, who appeared at eight sharp with a collection of dresses, shoes, and undergarments, perfect for a killer night out.

Corinne tried on everything. For this occasion, I selected the outfit that instantly made my eyes pop and my cock hard. Jennifer called it an asymmetrical mini-cami dress. It's metallic, in a shade so dark it's almost black...but not quite. The gentle gathers in the fabric pull toward the middle and show off her small waist and womanly hips. Her cleavage bursts from the V-neck that's anything but subtle, accentuated by a sleek silver chain that knots in the hollow of her throat, then dangles a shimmering length right between her lush tits. The slit above her thigh is cut nearly to her hip. The hem extends a scant couple of inches past her ass. On her dainty feet are a pair of strappy silver heels that wrap around her ankles and scream *fuck me now*.

The ensemble cost me an ungodly amount of money. I don't fucking care.

After Jennifer's departure, Harlow and Masey magically appeared, makeup kit, nail polish, and styling wand in tow.

While my sister and her bestie began the beauty works, I looked over the social media images of Corinne lunching with

Riley. Slick bastard. If I have anything to say, he won't be touching her again. At best, he's indecisive and insensitive. At worst, he's in league with Parker and up to no good. Either way, he's my enemy.

Since I need to understand his motives, I called Owen, the PI. It took me less than two minutes to shift his investigative focus from Corinne to Riley. "I want to know *everything*—what he had for breakfast, the last time he got laid, the tightness of his sphincter. Don't leave anything out."

Since Owen is nosy, ruthless, and cash-motivated, he jumped on my demand. "Give me twenty-four hours."

So while he gathers information, Corinne and I will do some much-needed damage control.

In the passenger's seat beside me, she looks drop-dead gorgeous. Soft curls brush her shoulders while her pouty red lips shred my self-control. No doubt, we're going to get a lot of attention tonight.

We need it.

"What about the reporters?" I try to sound calm.

"Are they really necessary? Are we going too far? Pushing back too hard?"

"If we don't, your brother controls public perception."

"Does that matter? Don't I really just need to convince him that our engagement is real?"

She's not wrong, but she's also not a fighter. I have to tamp down my impatience and my viciousness to explain.

I squeeze her hand. "Princess, Parker knows me. He knows the only way I won't fight back is if you don't mean anything to me." Actually, if I don't shove it down his throat with my fist until he gags on my knuckles, he'll know I'm not committed to her. "So, we have to put on a spectacle. The reporters have their friends on standby to help our appearance trend on social media. If we don't, your brother will dig in his heels even more. And you'll never get your money."

Corinne sighs. “I know you’re right. I wish I could just call him and make him see reason, but he seems beyond that.”

He is. And so am I.

This is war. I’m not taking any prisoners, only leaving casualties.

“Fighting this battle is why you came to me to start with,” I remind her.

But in the back of my head, I know Corinne and Parker are fast approaching the point of no return—and that I’m driving the car at breakneck speed, gunning for a head-on collision.

I’m just not sure who will be standing when everything is said and done.

“I did,” she concedes. “I just need to wrap my head around all this.”

She’s silent the last few minutes of our drive. I sense her nerves jangling. She knows the stakes. She understands the gravity. I wish I could take that from her, rather than putting her on display and adding fuel to the fire.

Parker’s fucking bomb made that impossible.

Finally, we arrive at one of the island’s swanky hotels. Their bar is *the* hopping nightlife spot, where locals and tourists rub elbows—and other body parts. Since it’s a Monday night, Noah and Harlow announced their appearance on social media to help us swell the crowd with partiers seeking a glimpse of the home-grown hero. They tagged Corinne and me, too. I’m ready for whoever shows up.

As I help her from the car and the valet drives my Audi away, my phone dings. “Harlow says they’re here.”

“Good.” Corinne looks incredibly nervous.

I scan the crowd spilling out from the bar and onto a hazily lit lanai. Samantha James’s “Breathe You In” is thumping. The drinks are flowing. The club-goers are milling around, seeing and being seen. The environment is ripe.

“Relax. Let’s give these people a show.” I take her hand.

Corinne wraps her fingers around mine and nods. “I’m going to need a drink.”

“I planned on it.”

At the door, there’s a line of people waiting to get in that wraps halfway around the building. It surpasses the usual weekend crowd. Good. Word will travel *fast* with multiple corroborating sources.

As I nod at the bouncer and bypass the line, thanks to Noah, I usher Corinne inside and scan the darkened room with flashing multicolored lights and swaying bodies, searching for familiar faces, especially Parker’s.

“Come on, you motherfucker. Let’s tango,” I mutter under my breath.

The crowd parts for us like the Red Sea. Women stare. Men eye-fuck Corinne. I keep a tight grip on her and lead her to the VIP table in the back corner, where Harlow and Noah are already holding court. As my brother-in-law signs autographs, my sister rises to hug us both. I order a round for the table from a passing server and sit, anchoring Corinne to my side with an arm around her waist.

The crowd watches. I feel their eyes. The way Corinne shifts nervously beside me tells me she does, too.

Noah leans in. “You braced? Shit is going to hit the fan.”

“One-hundred-percent.”

“What about Corinne?” He nods her way as the server sets down our drinks.

“She doesn’t like it, but she knows it’s necessary.”

“Then put a smile on her face fast and make the first move while you have people’s attention.”

“That’s my plan.” I lean toward Corinne again and drop a kiss on her bare shoulder. “Drink up, princess. We’re going to dance.”

She turns, eyes wide. “I’m not much of a dancer.”

“Hence the drinks.” I toss back my shot and watch as she consumes half of her French 75.

As she licks her lips, my libido kicks in. I pull her closer. “Kiss me.”

Normally, I’d just take her mouth. It’s right there. But refuting Parker’s claim that she’s marrying Riley is easier if Corinne initiates.

Her gaze darts around the room. “Everyone is staring.”

“That’s the theme of the night. Kiss me.”

My explanation makes her more nervous, not less. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

Because she’s too modest? Because our engagement isn’t real? Because she wants Riley after all? “What’s the problem?”

“When we start kissing...I lose my head.”

That makes me grin. “Perfect.”

She rolls her eyes, downs the other half of her drink, then takes a deep breath. “I’ve been thinking about what you said. You’re right. I came to you for help in fighting my brother for what’s mine. You’re doing what I asked. It’s not your fault this is uglier than I imagined. I need to put on my big-girl panties, stop worrying about Parker’s feelings, and do what needs to be done. I just can’t fathom why my brother would make an announcement that’s so untrue. Riley and I only had lunch—”

“Parker is using your ex and the situation because he’s desperate to get you away from me.” And I have a sneaking suspicion that Riley has ulterior motives that dovetail with her brother’s, but I’ll keep that to myself until I can prove it.

She shakes her head. “Even from a distance, he’s trying to control my life. Is he ever going to accept that I’m an adult who knows her own mind?”

“Unless you make him see it? No. If you want out from under his thumb, you have to draw clear boundaries and stick to them.” It’s on the tip of my tongue to suggest she give us a try for real, move to Maui—and in with me. We can figure us

out while I protect her from Parker's attempts to tear her down. I'll help support her business and give her all the time she needs to fall in love.

This isn't the place for that conversation, and she's too agitated to consider it now.

"My brother's guidance when I was younger and our grandparents were getting too old for the responsibility of raising a teenager made sense. But now it's crazy. And insulting to my intelligence."

"It is." And I'm proud of her for realizing it.

As the server walks by, I gesture for two more drinks. Harlow and Noah, wrapped up in his fans again, decline a second.

"Okay. We've got this. Let's do this," she says to herself as much as me.

Her self-pep-talk is adorable.

"I'm right beside you, princess. You look incredible. Now kiss me. I'll take it from there." Doing tonight's dirty work will be my pleasure.

She bites her lip. Our eyes meet, hers searching. Then she leans in and brushes a kiss across my lips.

It's light, sweet, and exploratory. Still, she sets me on fire. I need to keep my fucking head on straight...but every time she touches me, she does something to me I've never felt and can't explain.

Hauling her closer, I slant my mouth over hers and take the kiss deep. Her arms creep around my neck. I hear a little moan. I sink into her.

An elbow in my ribs jolts me from my sensual haze. I look up to find Noah staring, brow raised. "Shouldn't you take that someplace more public?"

He's right. As much as I'd love to have Corinne to myself so I can strip her down and get lost inside her, I paste on a smile and take her hand. Together, we make our way to the dance floor. People cluster around us. Fortuitously, the song

changes from something thumping and soulless to “Head Under Water” by Bless You and Lost Boy. I wrap her in my arms, bring her closer, and rock against her suggestively.

Under the music and the lights, she comes alive. Her body sways. She licks her lips, tosses her hair, and gives me a come-hither glance, her eyes burning as she stares into mine. I don’t know if she’s pretending.

I’m not.

I seize her delicate neck by the nape and take her mouth like a man possessed. Without hesitation, she opens to me, her grip on my shoulders tightening. The music fades away. So do the people. The only thing that matters is the connection between us. The way she rubs herself against me. The way the world reduces down to only her when she’s in my arms.

We’re jostled by a blonde with a banging body in a barely there yellow dress, dancing close, rolling video of us on her phone. I resist glaring at her since she’s serving our purpose.

Funny, she’s the kind of woman I would have once bought drinks for, then smooth-talked until she agreed to let me fuck her. Now I don’t even give her a second glance.

“Xavian?”

Corinne’s breathy voice snaps my attention back to her. “Princess?”

“How long do we have to stay?”

I grin. “You want me to take you home and do filthy things to you?”

A blush stains her cheeks. “I told you I lose my head when you kiss me.”

“Not long,” I promise in her ear. “Only enough to convince people you’re not interested in another man. Now make sure everyone can see your pretty, sparkling rock and kiss me again.”

“We’re throwing it in his face.”

I think she means her brother and that's the plan. But if Riley gets an eyeful on social media, too, maybe he'll back the fuck off. "Your brother doesn't understand subtle."

"He doesn't," she concedes as we gyrate together to the beat of the music. "But I'm wondering if you're really kissing me not because you're showing me off but because you're trying to arouse me."

"You figured out my devious plan." I wink.

Her laugh becomes a full-fledged giggle before she rises on her tiptoes and opens her mouth under mine. I capture her bruised lips, not giving a shit if I kiss off the rest of her lipstick.

I sink inside her plush, sugary mouth. Like before, my head starts to buzz. So does my body. I slide my hands down her back and cup her ass, pulling her against my aching cock. Corinne tears free from our kiss, gasping for breath, her head falling back to the beat. Her throat is an offering, a sacrifice to my lust. I take it, sweeping my lips up her neck, delighting when she shudders in my arms.

"It's working. I ache," she whimpers.

"Your pussy?"

She nods. Her breathing picks up pace, right along with the music. I'm vaguely aware that yellow-dress woman is still live-streaming us or whatever. Others nearby have joined. But I'm not focused on them. They can't hear us. They can't stop us. They can only broadcast our mutual desire to the world.

"Tell me how you want me to make it better in the most graphic way possible."

"Touch me...there. Make it feel good."

That's her ladylike version of dirty talk. It still sends me up in flames. "With my fingers? That skirt is so short, all I've thought about since you put it on is reaching under your hem and getting my hands on all your delicious spots. Or would you rather have my tongue?"

"You don't play fair," she whines.

“I’m not playing at all. It’s been too long since I’ve had my mouth on that pussy.”

“You just did last night.”

“Like I said, too long. I’d love to spread you out on my bed and tear off your panties—” I scrutinize her like I’ll be able to see what she’s wearing under her dress if I stare hard enough. “Do you have on that black lace thong Jennifer brought?”

“Yes.”

Fuck. Knowing she’s wearing the transparent scrap with corset lacing at the small of her back, tied off in a taunting little bow, is enough to make me lose my goddamn mind.

“I’m going to lick and tease you through the fabric until you beg me. You’ll see how much mercy I have then.”

Her lips part. Her breathing picks up. “Please.”

“Are you wet?”

“Yes.” She closes her eyes. “Sometimes all you have to do is walk into the room and...”

“You gush for me?”

She nods. “Yes.”

Oh, the truth is coming out. I couldn’t be more thrilled.

I send her a long, slow smile, then bend to skim my lips up her neck. “You smell insanely good. I want to eat you up, from your little pink toes all the way to this pretty mouth...” I brush my thumb over her lip, then murmur into her ear, “And linger on all the good places in between.”

Her nipples bead the front of her tight dress. “You’re trying to make me crazy so people will talk.”

“Uh-huh. Is it working?”

“Too well.” Her eyes drift shut.

My smile turns dirtier. “Look at me. Should I lick every sensitive spot on your body until you scream?”

“You do that all the time.”

If that's a protest, it's a weak one.

"What can I say? When it comes to you, I'm orally fixated." I brush a kiss across her lips.

She closes her eyes like she's trying to resist temptation—and failing. "Shouldn't I return the favor?"

Is Corinne interested in going down on me? "Anytime you want. Anywhere you want."

Her teeth sink into her lip shyly, her hot stare clinging to me. "I want to, but I've never..."

That only turns me on more. "It will be great. You almost can't do it wrong."

"Next time we're alone?"

Her husky whisper sends me up in flames. Suddenly, I'm impatient as hell to get out of here.

A quick glance tells me there are at least a dozen people recording us. It's a nice start, but I need to blow this up so we can leave this place and find some privacy.

"Hell yes."

The song changes. "Looking for Your Love" by DallasK starts blasting. Corinne gets into it. I hold her hips while she sways and I drag my lips over her skin. She rakes her fingers through my hair and sends me a hungry stare that makes me chafe to get her alone.

"Before you, I hardly ever thought about sex," she murmurs. "I think you've corrupted me."

"And I've loved every minute of it."

Her eyes soften. "I have, too."

That look, right there. I'd swear she feels something for me—not as a co-conspirator but as a man. As her lover.

Then we don't bother speaking or even look at the crowd for the rest of the song. I simply plant my mouth over hers and lose myself until there's nothing but her melting against me and the sound of my harsh breathing echoing in my head.

No idea how much time has passed before we bump into others dancing. I come up for air to assess the situation. Corinne's lashes flutter open. She looks dazed, lips swollen, and aroused. No mistaking that expression.

More cameras aim in our direction. More people stare.

No one seeing her face now could possibly imagine she's still in love with Riley.

Or am I just hoping that's true?

The song ends, and I look back to the table. Harlow and Noah stand. My brother-in-law salutes me. My sister blows us kisses.

Their way of saying the stage is ours.

Time to finish this act. I don't want to share Corinne's passion with the rest of the world. A little more shock and awe for the crowd ought to do it, then I'm taking her home so I can have her all to myself.

I lead her back to the table, a luxurious, semi-private booth that's all ours. As we sit, the server delivers fresh drinks. I swallow back my shot, grimacing at the burn blazing down my throat. But that fire has nothing on the one behind my zipper.

Beside me, Corinne sucks back half her glass, then looks at me with feverish eyes—and drops her hand to my thigh. There's a question on her face I don't understand, but I know the answer is sex. That's what she wants.

I'm happy to oblige.

"That's dangerous," I tell her with a pointed glance at her wandering fingers.

Her lips turn up in a kittenish smile as she presses her lips to my ear. Her hand drifts closer to my stiff cock.

"Want to know what I just realized?" she taunts me.

"Tell me."

"Right now, I can tease you. I can work you up and up and up..." Her fingers glide even higher on my thigh. She must

feel the heat emanating from my balls. “And you can’t do anything about it except kiss me.”

“I’ll make you pay later.”

The look she gives me from under her lashes nearly sends me off like a rocket. “I look forward to that.”

This is her playful side. I don’t know if the booze or the kisses have loosened her up or whether she finally feels comfortable enough with me to let her hair down, but I’m loving this. It doesn’t feel like she’s acting. I’d swear this is fucking real.

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to play with fire?”

“Maybe I like a little heat.”

“Hmm.” I kiss my way up her neck. “Too bad you’re wrong.”

“About?” she asks breathlessly.

“I can do more than kiss you.”

She looks scandalized. “Not here.”

I raise a brow at her. “I’ll get you off before we leave.”

Her eyes widen—and not purely in surprise. “With everyone watching?”

Is my once-shy virgin aroused by a little exhibitionism? Maybe. Corinne is full of surprises. Her curiosity is also conveniently timed and way more effective than what I had planned.

I reply with a shrug that suggests I don’t care who sees. It’s not true, but if some heavy petting in public does it for her...I can indulge. If it pisses Parker off, even better.

“You wouldn’t.” Her voice is so soft I almost can’t hear it, despite the fact our faces are inches apart.

“You daring me?”

Her fingers inch up my thigh again. I suck in a breath.

“What if I am?”

“You’re going to get burned, princess.”

Before she can sass back, I haul her onto my lap, straddling my thighs, and settle her over my throbbing inches. Grabbing hold of her hips, I stare into her eyes. Then I press up underneath her, right where she aches.

She gasps and grabs my shoulders. “Xavian...”

And she rocks down on me. Through our clothes, I feel the heat of her pussy, the burn of her need. It takes everything inside me not to throw my head back with a groan. But I have to keep my wits while she loses her mind.

I grit my teeth and growl in her ear. “That’s it, princess. Ride me.”

She grinds against me slowly, her fingers digging into me through my shirt. “I should stop, but this feels crazy good.”

It fucking does. “Give me your mouth.”

No hesitation. Her eyes slide shut as she leans in and settles her lips over mine. As I stroke my way inside her, I taste champagne and her excitement. It’s as addicting as the seductive sway of her hips as she rolls rhythmically over my cock.

Tingles tear up my spine. Sweat breaks out across my body. The crowd I know damn well that’s gathering around us recedes into the background. There’s only her, teasing me with the heat of her kiss. I’m fixated on her breasts bobbing in front of me and the pleasure tearing across her face.

She’s killing me.

I slide one hand low on her back and press her against my shaft. When she gasps into my mouth and her thighs tighten on my hips, need burns away my good sense. If it wasn’t for this fucking crowd, I would rip off her panties, unzip, and impale her until she’s taking every inch I’ve got. I hate that I can’t. And it’s pissing me off that every moment between us is for public consumption right now.

She’s mine. After this stunt, I’m done sharing.

I need to get this over with so I can take her back to my bed, lay her out, and love her right. If she's pretending feelings for me for the cameras, I'm going to wring them out of her until she gives me her heart for real.

With another moan, Corinne tears her lips away. Her head slides back. I lick my way up her throat and sink my teeth into the crook of her neck. Then I slide one hand under her skirt and work my thumb under her panties, settling it against her clit.

Slowly, I rub at her.

Her eyes fly open. Her cheeks bloom with red. She pants in my face, her breaths fast, hot, and sweet as she undulates on top of me.

Panic creeps into her expression. "Xavian..."

She's going to come. In public. She knows it, and she can't stop it.

"Now," I demand.

She's got to before she takes me with her.

Her hips sync up with the music. Her nipples stab the front of her dress. Her mouth gapes open as her eyes slam shut. She throws herself against me, and I'm surrounded by the feel and the scent of her. She might have been a virgin a few short days ago, but she's goddamn gutting me. Hell, she did with a glance. I feel her down to my bones. I ache to share this orgasm with her. I have to dig deep to find control.

Her body tenses up. Climax is seconds away. I shouldn't tempt fate, but I drag my mouth across her bare skin and inhale her. She even tastes like heaven. She makes me shudder in need. I'm so lost in her I don't know if I'll ever find my way out.

I love this woman.

Suddenly, the low hum of the crowd becomes a dull roar. It takes all my sheer will to lift my heavy lids. A small crowd of strangers and cell phones are focused on us. They're not even trying to hide it. Bastards. None of them can see Corinne's

face, so I wouldn't give two shits about the gawkers—except the one in a sedate suit who walks directly into my view.

Riley Stephens.

What the fuck is he doing here?

I tighten my grip on Corinne and send him a killing glare. His eyes narrow. No surprise, he hates my guts. His glare also says he intends to challenge me for her.

Never. I'll lay waste to him before he comes near her again.

Above me, Corinne's body starts to quake and buck. Her hips gyrate, quick and desperate. Ecstasy breaks across her face as her lips part wide. She's about to scream. I fucking want to hear it so bad and share in her pleasure. But I refuse to let anyone else listen to her wail of ecstasy, especially that son of a bitch Riley.

I grab the back of her neck and yank her lips down, covering them with my own just in time to swallow her orgasmic cries.

Closing my eyes, I shut everyone else out, reveling in the way Corinne clings to me through the last of her wracking, shuddering bliss, anger at Riley's sudden appearance bolstering my self-control.

Finally, she stills, breathing hard, and slowly opens her eyes. The pounding music and the murmurs of the crowd snap her back to herself, to the moment. Shock shoves aside her satisfaction. "Oh, my gosh. Are people watching?"

She'll know if I lie. "Yeah."

She winces, clearly embarrassed. I can almost see her thoughts racing. "I've never done anything that rash. I have to get out of here."

When she tries to lift from my lap, I clamp my other arm around her and hold her against me. "Listen, princess. We came here to prove you're not marrying your ex. It went further than I planned, but mission accomplished. And the crowd got the show they wanted. So we'll leave when we're

ready, but we're not skulking out like we've done something wrong."

"But this must be all over the internet." She shoots me a frenetic glance, clearly hoping I'll refute her.

I don't say a word.

Tears fill her big eyes. She presses trembling lips together. "What have I done?"

"What needed to be done. Don't beat yourself up."

"That's easy for you to say. You didn't orgasm in public."

"It was pretty fucking close."

Corinne shakes her head like my answer isn't good enough. "Please. The sooner we leave here, the sooner I can start living down this embarrassment."

Clearly, her exhibitionist leaning is nothing compared to her good-girl sensibilities. She's working herself up. I need to talk her down. For her sake, I hope Riley has slinked away, hat in hand, but that's probably wishful thinking.

Personally, I hope the gawking jackass sticks around so we can "chat."

"Princess, look at me. We didn't break any laws. You didn't show any additional skin. The table blocked everything from your waist down. There's a wall on your left and a row of plants on your right. At most, people saw you move and shake. You did that on the dance floor."

"Yeah, on the dance floor. Not on your lap! Everyone must think I'm a whore."

I grab her chin and force her to look at me. "No, and don't you ever suggest that again. To all those people, you got a little hot with the man you're going to marry. So what?"

"But you're not," she whispers, looking crushed.

I want so badly to tell her we can fix that right now. If she's willing, I'll marry her tomorrow. Yeah, I'm that far gone. I barely knew her five days ago. Now I'd take on her burdens, deal with Parker, shield her from the world...if she'd say yes.

This isn't the moment to ask her to be my wife.

Instead, I caress her cheek. "Let's not give anyone watching a reason to think there's anything wrong, okay?"

"I'll try." Her voice sounds so small.

It hurts me. She's probably felt ground down and helpless under Parker's iron-fisted rule for too long. I never want her to feel that way again.

"We've got this," I promise. "Now kiss me. If you can't muster more, a peck will do."

She blinks down at me. "I'm so sorry. This isn't just about me. It affects you, too. You're a professional. You have to maintain a reputation in the financial community—"

"Shh. I've always had one, princess. Anyone whose money I manage didn't choose me for my good behavior. Kiss me."

Slowly, she leans in and skims a gossamer brush over my lips, bitter with fear. I give her back reassurance.

Riley's glare is all over me; I feel it. But fuck him. I'm ignoring the bastard until I'm ready.

When she pulls away, I cup her face and settle my mouth at her ear. "Good, princess. All we have to do is make a splashy exit, but if we don't brazen this out, then everything we've done tonight is for nothing."

Her smile says she's trying desperately to be brave. "You're right. We did what we had to. If the crowd got what they were after, all the better."

I dish up a sly grin. "And maybe it felt good?"

Her cheeks turn rosier. "More than a little bit, but I'm not feeding your oversized ego."

That makes me laugh. "I'll just have to make you beg later."

"There you go, corrupting me some more," she banters back. "Now how do we get out of here?"

I'd prefer to put her on her feet and walk out, head held high. My gut tells me that with Riley Stephens here, that's impossible. If she sees him, the likelihood that her embarrassment makes another unscheduled appearance is high. And if she's still in love with the douche, guilt will probably turn up as a sidekick.

We can't afford that. The cameras the crowd wields would capture her reaction. Parker knows his sister, and that would only encourage his shit-stirring.

I'm going to have to get creative.

"Put your face in my neck."

She blinks at me. "Why?"

"Do you really want to see the crowd?"

"They're still staring?"

"Yeah."

She wrinkles her nose. "People are so nosy."

But she settles her cheek on my shoulder. I feel her hot exhalation at my throat.

It's now or never.

Moving with my still-stiff cock demanding attention is a bitch. But the greedy fucker is going to have to wait.

I slide around the semicircular booth with her still straddling my lap, then stand, her legs around my waist. We approach the crowd. It parts for us again, like butter yielding to a hot knife. More cameras roll. I shield Corinne's face with one hand and head for the exit with my best I-don't-give-a-fuck swagger.

Riley stands at the edge of the crowd, watching with another furious glare.

"Can we stop at the bathroom?" she whispers.

"It can't wait?"

"I'm a mess."

Her makeup or her panties? I destroyed her lipstick, for sure. But the thought of her being that wet makes me happy.

“There’s a bathroom in the lobby.” Hopefully, the gawkers don’t follow us.

As we approach the door to the club, I swerve through the open entrance that leads deeper into the hotel. It’s a well-lit, open-air space with traditional lines and Pacific-inspired influences. Thankfully, the ladies’ room is a handful of steps away.

I set Corinne on her feet. Not going to lie, I’m a little proud of myself when her legs wobble.

Steadying her with a hand at her elbow, I study her face. How is it possible that her makeup is smudged and her dress askew and she looks even more beautiful to me?

I’ve got it bad.

“You okay?”

She nods. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“Everything. You put yourself out there for me when you didn’t have to.”

I shrug. “Making out with you wasn’t exactly a hardship.”

A little smile tugs at her mouth. “And I know it got you a little closer to your revenge, but you could have made me walk out of there and face all those strangers who just saw one of the most intimate moments of my life. I appreciate that you didn’t. You protected me. I’m beginning to think you’re a much nicer guy than you let on.”

“Don’t be fooled,” I quip since I never learned to take compliments well.

“You keep saying that. I’m not sure I believe you anymore,” she tosses over her shoulder as she disappears into the restroom.

Seconds later, heels click behind me. They aren’t a woman’s stilettos, but a man’s loafers bearing down on me

with fire and wrath. Before I even turn around, I know who's coming.

"Why the fuck are you here?" I say to Riley, blocking the path between him and Corinne. I need to get him the fuck out of here before she emerges.

I'm not sure I want to see how she'll react to knowing the man she once loved watched her orgasm for me.

"Everything I heard suggested you're a son of a bitch, but my sources understated your egotism. What you did to her in there—"

"Made her shudder with pleasure?" I raise a brow. "Something you never did."

He bristles. "She's a *lady*."

Does this moron think I don't know that? "She's also a woman."

He glares at me with thunderous dark eyes. "And you treated her like a whore."

My fists clench. I lunge in his face. "If you ever say anything like that about her again, I will destroy you."

"Hit me. I dare you."

I send him a nasty smile. "And give you the satisfaction? No. I have other ways."

"You don't intimidate me."

He's lying. If he's done his homework at all, he's aware I know people and I have resources. And if I can prove my suspicions, he has no leg to stand on with Corinne. "Why are you sniffing around my fiancée? You let her go. She's mine. Get lost."

"It's none of your business."

He wants her back. "She *is* my business."

"We'll see about that." He slants me one last glare, then pivots away, disappearing into the club again.

chapter ELEVEN

Midnight has come and gone. In the passenger's seat, Corinne clutches her purse but thankfully refrains from digging inside to find her phone and scan social media.

The quiet is a temporary reprieve. I have to fucking tell her that Riley was at the club and that he saw everything. She deserves honesty. She'll find out eventually, anyway. But my gut is in knots. Would she have been so rattled during their lunch if she felt nothing for him? And she's too forgiving to insist they could never merely be friends without good reason. Whatever she says will probably prove she's not over her ex and it's going to suck.

You think it's better not to know so you can delude yourself?

"You're quiet," she observes.

"Thinking."

About when to tell her. How to tell her. The car isn't the place. If she needs comfort, I'm busy holding the wheel.

But it's an excuse. I'm not ready to open my mouth so she can break my heart.

"Same. I should look on the bright side. Not only will my brother know I'm serious about leading my own life, it will probably mean even more new orders. I don't know how I'll fulfill them all, but..."

"You will. You're smart, resourceful, and dedicated. My family will keep pitching in as they can. You've got all the space you need here to work and—"

"It's fantastic. I appreciate the help more than you know. This setup is way better than my studio apartment back in LA...but I can't impose indefinitely."

Is she hinting that she wants to leave? Already? Despite our insane sexual chemistry? No, I didn't think Corinne would fall wildly in love in a handful of days. I'm the only one crazy enough to do that. Still, I thought she'd be content to stay until she pries her inheritance from Parker. But after seeing the five-foot-ten blast from her past, is she looking to bolt?

I bite back a curse. "You've been with me less than a week. You did realize convincing someone as stubborn as Parker would take a while, right?"

"In theory, yes. But I hoped..." She gives me a self-deprecating shrug. "I should have banked on him not making this easy. I'm not sure what it says about my brother and me that I have to go to these lengths to wrest independence from him. Does that make him a tyrant or me a weakling?"

"In my book, the former. You tried not to go to war with him, and he stomped all over your consideration."

"But don't I bear some responsibility? I must have contributed to this mess somehow..."

It's so like her to shoulder blame. It's a quality that makes me like her even more as a human being, probably because it's one I don't possess. "Should you have pushed back sooner? Probably. But did he truly give you a reason until he withheld your inheritance?"

"Not really, so his refusal shocked me. Until then, I always thought we were fairly close. He wasn't my father, obviously, but the most paternal figure in my life since my grandfather was distant. As an adult, I get that the man probably didn't know what to do with an eight-year-old who constantly cried for her parents. But as a child, his indifference hurt, so I leaned on my brother. Now...he won't let me stand on my own."

There's that small voice again, the one that says she's been shuffled to the side and marginalized by people whose role was to love her.

I reach across the car and squeeze her hand. "I'm sorry."

She squeezes back. "I'm the one who's sorry. I know you got a juicy morsel of revenge tonight, but you helped my cause

so much. You don't need my boo-hoo problems. Your childhood wasn't a picnic, either."

Compared to hers? "It wasn't all bad. Mom and I were tight, and at least she lived long enough to see me become an adult. My biological father? No loss there."

"Even though you never met Barclay Reed, he must be a huge shadow in your life."

Sometimes, Corinne's understanding amazes me. "Yeah. Apparently, I'm a lot like him. Ruthless, cutthroat, and fixated on making money. I even have his eyes."

"Most of your siblings do, but you're *nothing* like that man. You're not malicious. You don't swindle people. And you're fiercely loyal to those you love."

The way she defends me nearly chokes me up. "Be careful or I'll accuse you of actually liking me."

"Maybe a little. But don't let it go to your head. You'll do something to change my mind soon, anyway," she teases, as if she needs to lighten the mood.

I scowl because she's right. "Probably."

"So what happens next? Parker won't take this lying down."

He won't. "Your brother will come after me."

So will Riley. Her ex will do his damndest to pursue Corinne out from under me, and since she's not disinterested... I don't know what tactic to take. Everything feels fucked-up. I need to convince her Riley isn't in her best interest.

She rears back. "Why? I'm the one who had an orgasm in the club."

"All by yourself? No, I gave you that orgasm. He'll hold me accountable."

The way she bites her lip tells me she didn't consider that. "What else can he do to you?"

“He has options, some I probably haven’t even considered.” I need to focus on something besides Corinne and figure out what those might be. “The things he can impact most—and where my money is tied up—are the ventures I’m entering into with my family. That’s the reason I don’t have the cash to lend your business. Bethany and Clint are letting me buy in as a full partner in our financial services enterprise. Maxon, Griff, and I are also starting a new company to combine market investors with tangible wealth. That’s requiring all my liquid capital.”

“That’s fabulous!” Her eyes light up. “I know you’ll make a killing with both.”

“Going into business with them is something I’ve wanted for years.” I hesitate. Corinne might not care, but I want her to understand. “When I lost Mom, I was barely nineteen. Not long after she passed, I thought about ending it all.”

She looks horrified as she takes my hand. “Xavian, no. There’s too much life in you. You’re so—”

I hold up a hand to stop her. I can’t hear her compliments, even if they’re platitudes. I don’t deserve them. After all, I’m selfishly choosing my business over hers. “Obviously I didn’t do it. You know what stopped me? Knowing she’d be pissed off. Friends like Hayes and Echo helped get me through. Even your brother. He probably saved my life that first Christmas without her by inviting me to your place. No matter what he does today, I’ll be forever grateful for that.” I sigh, hearing my loss and regret in that sound. “But I spent years feeling like an orphan, adrift. Then came the Reeds. I never expected to have family, much less a big, loud, loving one who embraced me so totally. We’ve all come from different places with different baggage yet melded into something really close and almost functional.”

She smiles, seemingly both at my halfhearted attempt at a joke and with fondness. “I’m so happy for you.”

“These deals? They’ll cement my place in the family I never dreamed I’d have—at least that’s how I feel. That’s why

it's so important to me." In fact, I want it so badly I can taste it.

"When I asked you for a loan, I had no idea. I would never want to take that from you." Then her expression turns contrite. "Oh, but you've put off all that because I dragged you into my mess, haven't you? I'm so sorry."

"I could have said no."

She shakes her head. "Parker was determined to be a thorn in your side. I'm sure it made sense to deal with the problem before taking your next step."

Doesn't she grasp that it's not about "the problem" anymore? It's about her. Or does she not want to see that?

I should have known something was wrong when Hadley wanted my ring more than my heart. Am I falling into the same black hole again?

The rest of our ride home is silent. I have time to stew about the shit that's going to hit the fan once I drop the Riley bomb.

Back at my place, I help her into the house and follow her to my bedroom. Since I have to be at the office in seven hours, I should go to bed. But I can't procrastinate anymore. How do I say this?

In the shadows, she turns to me, looking anxious. "It's late. You should probably sleep."

Her voice says she wishes I wouldn't. "What do you need?"

After I listen, I'll tell her what has to be said and let the chips fall...

She looks down at her wringing hands, then back up at me. "I-I want to touch you. Are you too tired?"

My pulse and my hope leap. She wants me. That means something, right?

Yeah, she likes orgasms.

"For sex? Princess, I'd have to be dead not to want you."

“No. You made me a promise earlier.”

“I did?” What the fuck am I forgetting? “Oh, to make you scream. Come here. I’m always happy to do that.”

Then I’ll tell her. Maybe another wrenching orgasm will soften her...

“No. I mean the something else you promised me.” She drops to her knees at my feet, looking up at me with beseeching eyes. Then she reaches for my fly. “You said anytime I want. Anywhere I want.”

Holy. Shit. Fire ignites my blood and razes through my veins. I swallow down need. There is nothing I want more than her mouth on my cock.

And until I give her the truth, there’s nothing I deserve less.

I grab her wrists before she lowers my zipper and I lose the will to be honest. “We should talk first.”

She scrambles to her feet, straightening her skirt as if smoothing down her incredibly short hem a half inch will somehow shield her from my rejection. “It’s fine. Never mind.”

“If you think for one second that I’d rather talk before you blow me, you’re wrong.”

“Then why did you stop me?”

I fucking wish I didn’t have to say this. I’d prefer a goddamn enema. “Tonight, at the club, Riley was in the crowd. I didn’t see him until you were seconds from climax.”

Her dark eyes flare wide. “And he watched me...”

Come? “Yeah. It was too late to stop.”

Panicked, she presses a hand to her chest like it will prevent her from hyperventilating. “He saw everything? You’re sure?”

I nod. “It’s why I carried you out. I worried if you caught a glimpse of him—”

“I couldn’t have held it together.”

Because she still has feelings for him—exactly as I fucking feared. But I shove down my frustration and spit out the rest. “He followed us out. After you disappeared into the ladies’ room, he and I exchanged words.”

She looks even more horrified. “What did he say?”

I draw the line at admitting he wants her back. My responsibility is conveying that he was a witness. I won’t be his messenger. “He wasn’t happy I treated you like, in his words, a whore.” I grit my teeth. “Don’t worry. I corrected him.”

She pales. “He said that?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, my gosh.” Her eyes fill with tears before she bolts.

“Corinne...” I lunge, managing to catch her arm in my grasp.

“Don’t! I-I can’t. It’s humiliating.” She twists free, running to my bathroom and slamming the door before locking it behind her.

Her first sob is a stab to my heart.

I growl out a curse and tear off my tie, flinging it across the room. Next, I toe off my shoes and kick them to a dark corner.

Of course she still has feelings for the bastard. I should have fucking known someone like her would go for the “nice” guy who behaves like a gentleman, who hasn’t slept with the entire cheerleading team his senior year merely to see if he could, and who would never get her off in public to give her brother a metaphorical middle finger.

Yanking my shirt from my pants, I tear through the buttons and toss it away. After I shove my phone on the charger and bang my wallet on my dresser, everything else I’m wearing hits the floor.

Why did I ever think she'd want me for me? Women don't. They never have. When I was younger, they came to me because I was a bad boy rumored to be good in bed. Lately, women I bang see nothing but cock and dollar signs. Hadley fooled me. She wanted upward mobility, which I understood. I made the mistake of trusting she wouldn't fuck me over to get it.

Corinne is nothing like those women. She's the yin to my yang. The opposite who attracts me. I thought something real was brewing between us.

I've been bullshitting myself.

But if I want her, is giving up really the answer? After all, no one wins a game they never play...

Maybe it's possible to pleasure my way into her heart. It's a long shot, but what the fuck else do I have? Quitting? Defeat? Hard pass. I'm not giving her over to Riley, that douchebag, without a fight. She might think she has feelings for him, but I'm convinced I've got at least a sliver of her heart, too.

Instead of reaching for shorts and a tank and retreating to another part of the house where I don't have to hear Corinne cry for another man, I march for the door—stark naked—and use the key stashed above the frame to let myself in. We're going to have this out.

Now.

The steam billowing from the shower is thick. Corinne sits on the tiled bench, knees against her chest, shoulders shaking, as the water pelts the top of her bowed head.

I grind my teeth. Yes, I'm goddamn furious. Not with her. She can't help her feelings. But why the fuck would such an extraordinary woman fall for a guy who's both boring and going nowhere? That's not to say she would automatically choose the ruthless son of a bitch who, until she came along, devoted his life to making green and tapping ass. One who gleefully said yes to revenge. But I won't let up until Corinne knows he's all wrong for her and I'm an option.

Yanking open the glass door, I step into the enclosure large enough for a basketball team. She jerks her head up to stare at me with huge eyes dripping mascara and a trembling mouth. It's not her best look, yet she still makes my heart stop.

“What are you doing here?”

Her tears spark my temper. “Why are you letting that asshole make you cry?”

“You don't understand.” She shakes her head. “How could you? You brazen your way past most every problem and BS through the rest. You've probably never been embarrassed in your life.”

“Riley is an idiot. He dumped you. Why give a shit what he thinks?”

She looks at me as if I've lost my mind. “He was my world once.”

Ouch. I didn't need to hear that. “He's not now, is he?”

Angrily, Corinne uncurls from her sitting-up fetal position and springs into my personal space, her jaw and her fists clenched. Oh, I've hit a sore spot. She's mad. There's fight in her eyes. I'm happy to indulge.

“What I don't know is *why*,” she yells. “According to you, he bought me a ring. And something I did was so terrible, so repulsive, that he returned it and left me—like every other fucking person in my life. And you're surprised I'm unhappy that I've horrified him again?”

Whoa. I've never heard Corinne curse at all, much less drop an F-bomb. She'd only do that if this dude was important to her.

That fucking pisses me off.

“Ever think maybe you weren't the problem?”

“I was the only other person in the relationship.”

“If you'd acted any differently—then or now—it wouldn't have been you he loved, just an illusion. Would merely having his warm body beside you be enough to make you happy?”

“Shut up,” she snaps. “You don’t understand.”

“Yes, I do.” I grab her arms and haul her against me. Of course I’m hard. She’s naked, my blood is pumping, and just like my heart, my cock wants to prove that I’m the man for her. “Answer the fucking question.”

“It’s absurd. Of course not.”

She’s lying to herself. “What did you love about him? Name three things.”

“I don’t have to explain my feelings to you.”

“I’m just trying to understand. If he was the love of your life, tell me why.”

“You won’t get it.”

I raise a brow at her. “Because I’m too stupid?”

“Don’t twist my words.”

“Then spell it out for me.”

“Fine.” She fumes, arms crossed belligerently over her chest as a silent KEEP OUT sign. “He...he had nice manners. He treated his mother well. A-and...”

I start fake-snoring. “He comports himself well and he’s a mommy’s boy? That’s what you’ve got? Bo-ring.”

“Don’t be a jerk. We also have the same taste in books.”

That makes me roll my eyes. “That will never fulfill you. And that definitely won’t get you hot, princess.”

She bristles. “You don’t know that. Besides, sex isn’t a big consideration. It’s not that important in a marriage.”

I burst out laughing. “Who told you that bullshit? The Hallmark Channel?”

She wrenches from my grasp. “That’s sexist, dismissive, and rude. Besides, what do you know about love?”

“What do you know about sex?” I counter. “Except that you like when we have it.”

She flushes. “That’s not the point.”

“But it’s the truth. And it’s a symptom of what was lacking in your relationship with Riley. You know what I think?”

“I don’t care. I wanted five minutes alone with my thoughts. Were you considerate enough to give them to me? No. You bulldozed your way in. Riley—”

“Would never have done that? Yeah, no shock there. Since he dumped you, it stands to reason he wouldn’t give enough of a shit to come after you.” Doesn’t she fucking see that?

“Interrupting a woman’s private time is supposed to tell her a man cares?” She snorts. “You don’t understand the fairer sex. You’re better at getting them into bed than keeping them there. Maybe you should stick to that.”

Corinne reaches for the shower door to push her way out. I haul her back. Water sluices down our bodies, every inch pressed together. She breathes hard as she stares up at me. Her heart pounds. Her pupils dilate.

She might not want to want me...but she does. I’m convinced she has feelings for me and she’s afraid of them. She’s still clinging to Riley because he’s familiar. She idealized their relationship because he was safe.

And I need to prove it to her.

“Okay. I’ll start with you. Mr. Tepid can’t give you what I can, princess.”

“A headache?”

“Funny. A screaming, wall-banging, rock-your-world orgasm. In fact, I think you never had sex with him not because it ‘didn’t feel right’ but because, deep down, you weren’t in love with him. That’s why you weren’t excited by him.”

“That’s not true.”

“Tell me one time he had you even close to coming.”

“He... Well, we d-didn’t... I wasn’t—”

“Into him? I know. You settled for Riley, hoping he would fill that gaping void in your life your absent family created.

And since he's a loser who's going nowhere, you convinced yourself he'd never leave."

"That's not true! Riley had plenty of prospects."

I level her a scathing stare. "He's got a mid-level job for a mid-level financial firm handling mid-level clients."

"Everyone starts somewhere. And a man's job isn't the full measure of his character."

"But his ambition is. Riley has none, so he has no value."

"In *your* estimation."

"In most of the financial world's. You're not the kind of woman who should ever accept anything average. You deserve the best, and he isn't it." Her stubborn expression tells me she's still refusing to see her ex's shortcomings. I need to try a different tactic. "Do you know his sexual history?"

"No." She looks offended by the question. "It doesn't matter."

"It does," I argue. "I'll bet he's slept with fewer than five women. One was probably a high school sweetheart. Maybe he hooked up a couple of times in college. He may have been lucky enough to find a drunk girl or two at bars over the years. But he's never had any serious game."

"So he didn't choose to sleep with half the planet? To most people, not being indiscriminately promiscuous is a good thing."

"It's not that he *chose* to be abstinent; no one was interested in fucking him, not even you. And by the way, at least part of the reason he returned your engagement ring without proposing is his lack of confidence and conviction. Why would you want a man like that?"

"You don't know him."

"I know his type. Even when he had the chance to marry way out of his league, he couldn't commit. And he's as thrilling as wallpaper paste. I doubt he can even find your clit. I'm sure he can't satisfy you."

“This conversation is ridiculous.”

“Did you ever ask yourself why you weren’t interested enough to find out?”

“You don’t understand—”

“I do. Do you think I’m wrong? You think he scores a lot?”

“He’s discerning. There’s nothing wrong with choosing quality over quantity. Not every man thinks with his penis.”

I burst out laughing again. “Yeah, they do. Some saps, like Riley—”

“He is *not* a sap.”

“They know they’re not going to get tail on their looks, personality, or charm, so they fall back on things like nice manners to impress girls like you who are too afraid to strive for more.”

Corinne gasps. “I am *not* afraid.”

“You’re terrified. And you know I’m right. When he left, he hurt your pride way more than he broke your heart.”

“That’s not true. I was devastated.”

“You were shocked. And you’ve done nothing but question yourself since. If you won’t be honest with you, I will. You don’t know your worth. If you’d married him, you would have sold yourself short. You’d be better off marrying me.”

She gapes, seemingly stunned. “That would be like marrying a tiger.”

“Because I’d be panting, pawing, and eating you every night?” I back her against the shower wall, skimming my lips across her jaw.

She rolls her eyes. “There you go again, making everything about sex. I meant that I’d have to be crazy to marry you.”

I brace my palms beside her head and lean in. “Maybe. But you’d never be bored.”

“And you would, so you would never be faithful.”

“Oh, you’re wrong, princess. I would be the most devoted husband you can imagine.”

Corinne scoffs. “It’s easy to say that when you don’t have to prove it. You’ve slept with most of the women you’ve met, so I know better than to believe you’ll stick to just one. It’s the reason players like you don’t marry good girls like me. Why are we even having this conversation?”

She still has no idea?

Fuck it. This argument isn’t getting me anywhere. Maybe some nonverbal communication will.

“Never mind. You wanted to touch me? Bring it on.”

“I’m not in the mood anymore.”

I send her a dirty smile. “Let me fix that.”

She opens her mouth to protest. I curl my hand behind her nape, maneuver her face under mine, and seize her lips. She stiffens. I half expect her to shove me away or knee me in the balls. Instead, she softens before slowly, slowly opening to me. Our tongues touch. She quickly retreats...then tentatively slides hers against mine again. Her breathing changes. Her head tilts. She deepens the exchange. Finally, she moans, loops her arms around my neck, and unabashedly sinks into the kiss.

With a groan, I press her into the tile, gripping her as if I can’t get close enough, like I’ll die if I don’t have her. It sure feels that way. All it takes for me to want Corinne is a glance, a touch, a whiff of that heady female scent. Hell, just thinking about her gets me fucking hot.

My skin is plastered against hers, but we’re still not close enough. Cupping her face, I lose myself in her, eating at her mouth possessively. Against me, she turns restless, grabbing and scratching and writhing for more. I’m already halfway to losing my head when she reaches between us and grips my cock with an earnest, inexperienced stroke.

Electric need shoots up my spine. “Jesus, princess... I want you so fucking bad.”

I've been aching since the bar.

"You don't need to give me your rehearsed lines to entice me to say yes. Just kiss me."

Corinne thinks she's like all the others to me? Nothing could be further from the truth.

"I'm not only going to make you come, I'm going to make you think."

"About what?" she pants.

"Everything."

I refuse to spell it out. Confessing what I'm feeling when she's been crying for another man...no. I'm fearless in moneymaking. I will go balls to the wall for an investment I believe in—all day, every day. But pouring out my heart isn't in my wheelhouse. The one time I tried it ended badly. Corinne doesn't seem like the sort who would betray me by jumping ship at the first offer...but she might walk away because her heart was never mine.

I'd rather save myself the humiliation and let my body do the talking.

Spinning her around to face the wall, I cover her back with my chest, planting my lips against her neck and feeling my way down her body, from her engorged nipples so sensitive she whimpers when I roll them between my fingers, to the flat of her stomach, and finally to the soft cleft between her legs.

"You're already wet for me," I murmur.

"No."

"Yes. And swollen, too." I strum her clit with a barely there touch.

She presses her cheek against the cool tile and closes her eyes. "I was already wet. From earlier."

"You cleaned up in the hotel bathroom. All this"—I insert my fingers between her folds, into her furrow, testing my way from her needy bud to her slick opening—"is new. It's for me."

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does,” I growl in her ear, settling my digits back over her clit. “Don’t lie to me. And don’t lie to yourself. Everything between us matters.”

Corinne gasps, rocking her hips against my touch. “Why?”

“You figure it out.” I nip my way across her shoulder, then up her neck, before settling against her ear. “While I make you claw the walls and scream your throat raw.”

“Xavian...”

“That’s right. I’m the man with my hand on your pussy. The only man who’s ever had his hands—and mouth—here. The only one who’s been inside you. The only one you’ve come for.”

The only one who’s ever loved you.

“Why? Why do you make me ache? Every single time you touch me, I”—she gasps—“melt for you.”

“You think about that.” I slide my free hand up her side to cradle her breast and work the hard tip.

Her head slides back to my chest. “When you touch me, I can’t think at all.”

“I would do this to you every night. I would live for the moment we hit the sheets and I could make your world only about us, about the way I fill you, about the ecstasy overwhelming you.” Corinne doesn’t answer with words, just a keening sound so full of need it makes me harder than fucking steel. “You want that?”

“I shouldn’t...”

She’s twice as wet as she was when I put my fingers on her earlier. Her clit is beyond swollen, hard, and quivering. She’s close.

“But you do,” I murmur in her ear. “I fucking want that, too.”

Just like I want to come with her. I want her to feel us together.

I'm dying to get inside her.

Books and movies make shower sex seem like a breeze. Since I'm nearly a foot taller than Corinne, our height differential is real. I've got to get creative.

Gripping her hips, I lift her off her feet and turn her to the bench.

She lets out a protesting cry. "What are you doing?"

"On your knees, hands against the wall."

"Why?" she asks. But she's already in position.

Her graceful shoulders, the delicate line of her spine, the curves of her hips and ass...the stuff of my fantasies. But they're even better because of the woman they're attached to. She's everything I didn't realize I need.

Brushing the wet hair off her back and over one shoulder, I align myself behind her. But the fucking spray beating down on us is turning cold. Cursing, I yank the lever to cut off the shower, then refocus my attention on Corinne, on her choppy breathing as she watches me over one shoulder. Then I lean over her back, cover her clit with my fingers again, and surge inside her in one raw, teeth-gritting thrust.

Sensations sizzle across my skin and zip down my spine. Holy fucking son of a bitch. Nothing in my life has ever felt this good.

No, it's never felt so right.

"Xavian!" Corinne scratches at the tile, her voice pleading.

"Here, princess. Right. Fucking. Here," I vow, slamming my way inside her.

"Yes!" Her high-pitched wail drives the animal in me more primal.

"I'm going to stay here, so deep inside you, you won't remember what it feels like when I'm not fucking you."

"Please."

She tosses her hips back at me, rolling with every stroke as she gropes for my thigh. Her nails sink into my skin. Her desire makes me burn. This woman is going to leave me in ashes. Everything about her drives me higher, from her teeth biting her lower lip to hold in her begging to the tight squeeze of her pussy, ensuring I never want to leave. Most of all? Those eyes. Dark, glittering, begging. She doesn't understand what's happening between us.

I'm not sure I do, either.

I no longer feel anything but the pounding of my body into hers. Every one of her moans echoes off the tile as the enclosure steams up with our mingled, panting breaths. Passion drips, and I'm so dialed into her that, when she goes over, she'll take a piece of me with her forever.

I don't even care anymore. I should. My inner cynic tells me I'm making myself too vulnerable—something I swore I'd never do again after Hadley—but it's too late. I'm too far gone. I'm all in. If I have any prayer of ruining her for all other men, I need to give her pleasure that's epic.

Closing my eyes, I brace my palm on the wall above her, rub her rhythmically with my fingers, and saturate my senses in her.

“Princess...” I breathe against her skin, huffing and working to slide deeper inside her with every thrust.

She grips my fingers against the wall and mewls, moving with me, tightening until I swear I'm going to explode. “I'm on fire.”

“Yes... Burn with me.”

“I'm dying.”

“We'll go down together.”

“Why?” she sobs out.

Is it always so intense? Because there's something between us. There must be, and she has to be feeling it, too. Something. At least a twinge. That makes her mine on some level, right?

“Just feel it.”

She squeezes my hand. “I can’t stop it.”

Perfect. “Come with me.”

Her strangled whimper pours into my ears, driving me higher. Her head falls back. Her body goes taut. Need flares lava hot through my body. Even my skin is ablaze.

She’s going to kill me.

“Fuck, princess.” I surge deeper inside her. “Baby...”

“Yes. Oh, my... *Yes!*” she roars, her voice a low rattle that ecstasy rips from her chest.

Then she’s bucking, squeezing me, tripping me over into the kind of satisfaction that blows off the top of my head and destroys any semblance of control. I ride her through climax, pumping furiously until she runs out of breath and voice. Until her legs give out from under her. Until she melts into me.

Until she trembles all over. “Xavian...what’s happening with us?”

I did more than rock her world. I knocked her off her axis. As I mentally grope for a reply other than *I love you*, the emergency chime on my phone peals. It’s the ringtone I’ve assigned Bethany.

It’s after one in the morning. If the mom of two kids under age three is calling me now, shit has hit the fan.

She’s seen social media.

Still, I hold Corinne tight. “You okay?”

“I...don’t think so.” She sounds shell-shocked.

That means no. I have to hold her. If everyone in her life has left her, I have to be the one who stays and puts her first.

“Come here.” Slowly, I withdraw from her swollen clasp and ready myself to discard the condom.

Then I realize I never donned one.

My breath abandons my lungs. The world spins around me. I brace myself against the wall as time stands still.

Shit. How did I lose my head? What if Corinne gets pregnant?

Would a baby really be a bad thing?

In the next room, the phone stops ringing, then starts again. Corinne turns to face me, then gasps when semen drips down her inner thigh. Her stare bounces up to me, her mouth stunned open.

“I’m sorry. I lost my head.”

She sinks to the bench, shaken, pressing a hand to her mouth. “I’m in the middle of my cycle.”

That news actually sparks hope, but it’s obvious she doesn’t feel the same.

Fuck.

The phone stops ringing a second time.

“It’s going to be fine.” That’s a promise. I’ll make everything all right...somehow.

She gathers her knees to her chest. Clearly, my words don’t reassure her.

The phone trills again, now sounding more insistent.

“You going to answer that?” she asks.

Does she want me to because she wants space between us? Or because she suspects it’s urgent?

The timing couldn’t be worse.

“I’ll be right back.” I jerk away, clean up, and grab a towel, shoving my way out of the enclosure. Corinne stands slowly, still trembling as I fish out another towel and wrap it around her. “Then we’ll talk this out.”

“How?”

The phone stops ringing, then promptly starts again. I know Bethany. She’s determined. She’ll call all night until I answer.

Since I don’t know what to say to Corinne, I march into my bedroom and I grab the device from the charger. “What’s

the matter?”

“You’re actually asking me that? After what you did tonight? I’ve been calling for thirty minutes. The business is melting down, and what the hell are you doing? My guess is getting laid.”

Admitting she’s right would be like setting off a bomb. “Melting down? That’s got to be hyperbolic.”

“It isn’t. Our two biggest clients have already called to ask why you’re making a spectacle and how they’re supposed to take us seriously.”

“What the fuck?” No matter how much of a manwhore I was in the past, they never seemed to care. Then again, I’ve never been this public about my sex life.

“Our name isn’t the best in the financial world, so we have to do everything better, cleaner, and smarter. You all but fucked your fiancée in public!”

Corinne wanders into the room, shivering in her skimpy towel, purse and clothes in hand. Her wince tells me she heard every word Bethany yelled. *Damn it.*

Unfortunately, my sister isn’t wrong. Despite the strikes against us, Bethany founded our firm to compete against the world’s most venerable financial institutions. She’s trying to project an image of exclusivity and prestige. I shouldn’t have been so reckless.

“But I didn’t,” I assure Bethany. “I’m sorry it affected the firm. I’ll write a formal apology.”

“I’m not convinced that will make any difference. I have three more voicemails from other clients I’m afraid to listen to...”

As my sister recites the damage I’ve done to our brokerage, which we’ve all busted our asses to make a success, I feel horrible. I never wanted to jeopardize the firm, just help Corinne.

Well, and stake my claim on her.

Across the room, she fishes her phone from her little clutch. Within seconds, her face dissolves into pale, blanching horror.

She's looking at social media. It must be catastrophic. Goddamn it, I have to do damage control. I just don't know what.

"How can I fix this, Bethany? Should I take a three-month leave?"

She doesn't answer.

Holy shit. My sister wants more penance than that? "You want me to call off the partnership?"

She sighs.

Then I get the picture. "You want me to fucking resign?"

"You're my brother, and I love you, but that might have to be something we consider."

Inside, I turn volcanic. Everything I've worked for and helped her build... "You seriously want me gone from the firm?"

Bethany is usually ice-cold when it comes to business. She's practical, highly intelligent, and rock-solid. Tonight, I hear her voice warble. "It's not what *I* want. You saved this business almost singlehandedly when I was a new mom and drowning. I know you and your fiancée love each other, and I don't care what you two do. But the rest of the world does. Have you even looked online?"

On cue, Corinne gasps. I look up to find her gripping her phone and swallowing hard like she's going to be sick. "Oh, my gosh."

Tears fall down her cheeks. The sight crushes me. I've got a firm about to go down in flames, a boss-slash-sister who might cut me loose, and the future I've craved is slipping through my fingers.

But Corinne needs me more.

"I have to go," I tell Bethany.

“Right now? Seriously?”

“Sorry. We’ll talk soon.” I don’t wait for her reply, just hang up and toss my phone on the bed, then dash for Corinne.

I take the device from her hand and glance down. Riley texted her screen shots from all over the internet, nasty posts calling her every manner of slut while demanding I be fired and that my CFP be revoked.

That son of a bitch.

“Let’s sit down and talk.”

My voice snaps Corinne out of her stupor. She snatches her phone back just as Riley sends another message.

What the fuck does he want?

To make your woman his again.

Corinne shakes her head, backing away. “I...I can’t do this anymore. I came to you for a favor, but I never thought it would ruin your life. I’m so, so sorry. You tried everything to help me...”

And she thinks leaving me is the answer?

“It’s all right, princess. I’ll smooth things over with Bethany and our clients.” At least I’ll try. “You and I can still see this through. This brouhaha will die down in a few days. Your brother will crack if you stay strong. We’re close—”

“No. Xavian, we have to stop.” She presses a hand to her chest, her face twisting with guilt. “I’m ruining your life. That partnership you want so badly is all but gone, and if they take your CFP—”

“They can’t. Someone’s interpretation of public indecency isn’t cause to yank my certification.” Riley, the motherfucker, knows that. He’s using the threat to scare her.

It’s working.

Corinne gapes at me like I’ve gone insane. “Does it matter if you lose all your clients? Revenge can’t possibly be worth all this to you. I know you hate my brother, but stop and think —”

“I don’t give a shit about your brother anymore.”

“That’s probably healthier, but if you’re trying to get your reputation back, this isn’t the way.” She straightens her shoulders with a resolution that sends a chill down my spine, then heads toward her suitcase. She grabs a couple of garments she’s strewn on the nearby chair, tossing them in before slamming the lid. “I’m going to go.”

“In the middle of the night? The hell you will. None of this is your fault. I’m a big boy who went into this with my eyes wide open. You’re not ruining anything. I’ll recover. Stay.” I’ve never begged for anything in my life, but I’m begging her now. “Please.”

“I can’t,” she chokes as more tears fall. “I’m ruining my life, too. Since we started this charade, I’ve felt like I’m on a carnival ride. Dizzying highs and terrifying lows. Every day, I’m being jerked, spun, and flipped around on a ride with no seat belts and no end. I can’t hang on anymore.”

“I’ll do a better job protecting you. I’ll get the heat off you.”

“You can’t. And I can’t pretend anymore.” She taps out a message—to Riley?—then tosses her phone on the bed. “I’ll get the rest of my things later.”

Pretend what?

When she turns for the bathroom, clean clothes in hand, I grab her arm. “If this is about the condom, I’m sorry. It’s never happened before. I’ll be more careful next time. And if you get pregnant—”

“There can’t be a next time.” She jerks away. “We’re turning each other inside out. Less than a week ago, I was just Parker Emerson’s fairly anonymous sister sitting at home, making jewelry for people on the internet. You were Barclay Reed’s financial wizard son doing such amazing things with portfolios that investors ignored your personal exploits. But now we’re plastered all over TMZ. I can’t handle it anymore. I can’t let you ruin yourself.”

Corinne disappears into the bathroom and locks it. Since I fucking left the key on the counter beside the sink, I sag against the door, resisting the urge to break the damn thing down, and curse.

Maybe if I give her a minute or two alone, she'll calm down.

But I'm kidding myself. She won't. What the hell do I do now?

Across the room, her phone chimes. That asshole Riley. I'm going to fucking let him have it with both barrels.

I snag the device. Since the screen hasn't gone dark yet, I see their string of texts. I would feel guilty about invading Corinne's privacy if I wasn't trying to protect her. This douche hurt her once. He doesn't deserve a second chance.

But when I read his message, my heart stops.

I've sent a car for you. It will pick you up in ten minutes. Call me when you're safely inside. I'll be waiting.

Rage skyrockets. It's all I can do not to throw her phone across the room. Sadly, that won't do any good. Neither will hunting down this bastard and beating the hell out of him. But it sure would make me feel better.

From my nightstand, my phone rings. It's Bethany again. If I ignore her, I can kiss any remote chance of this partnership coming to fruition goodbye.

Since Corinne is still in the bathroom, I lunge for the phone just as Riley sends her another text. It's another mention from the gossip mongering press.

PARKER EMERSON'S SISTER TURNS SLUT FOR NEMESIS.

Fuck, is that how they're spinning this? Not that we're a loving couple who want to get married, despite her brother's objection. Instead of being a modern-day Romeo and Juliet, the press has shamed and blamed her for expressing her passion for her "fiancé." I'm just a footnote in the incident,

only noteworthy because I'm Barclay Reed's bastard offspring and Parker's enemy—and I got her off in public.

No wonder she's horrified.

To the backdrop of my still-jangling cell, I scroll up the message string and find similar damning headlines. A few excoriate me, sure. But those that aim their vitriol at Corinne are demeaning, vicious, and beyond any public censure I foresaw. Beyond anything aimed at me. Talk about a double standard.

I close my eyes as a thousand-pound boulder of guilt sinks to my gut. Her phone slips from my hand and falls to the bed.

What the fuck have I done?

A moment later, she emerges from the bathroom, eyes haunted and red-rimmed. Since I'm wearing nothing but a towel around my waist, she'll hardly look at me.

“Don't you need to answer that?” She glances toward my phone, but it's a distraction from what's happening.

I've crossed too many lines, said and done too much. No apology is going to fix that.

“That's it? You're leaving?” I won't beg again. Her expression tells me it won't do any good.

But the thought of her walking out, of never holding her again, hurts more than I imagined. More than almost anything I've ever felt.

Still, she's trying to protect herself, her future. I can't be a selfish shit and stop her when I've done so much damage.

“It's for the best.” A tear slides down her cheek.

It nearly destroys me. “How do we spin this? How do we explain our breakup?”

She shakes her head, eyes closing. “I can't think about that right now. Talk to Bethany, come up with a story. It's okay if you need to throw me under the bus. I understand.” Her smile turns cynical. “Since Parker has done that to you already, it's my turn.”

I grip her shoulders. “I would never do that to you. Ever.”

“You should.” She backs away, out of my reach. “I’m incredibly sorry. For everything.”

Then she scoops up her phone and her suitcase and heads to the front door. Nothing I can think to say will undo the damage I’ve caused. I can’t keep dragging her through my mud and hurting her. Even though it goes against my instinct not to fight, I let her go—and take my goddamn heart with her.

chapter TWELVE

The night feels like the longest of my life. I can't stand to even be inside the house, much less sleep in my bed. In fact, my place, where I've never brought women in the past, is now a never-ending reminder of Corinne and the fact she's gone.

Since I have no reason to go to the office—another call with a tearfully regretful Bethany made that clear—I camp out through the wee hours of the morning on an oversized chaise lounge on my lanai and stare at the starry black sky.

I hate feeling impotent. At heart, I'm a doer. I make things happen. I strategize. I hustle. But there's nothing I can do now. Any action I take, whether that's punching back at Riley or confronting Parker, will only deflect onto Corinne. She's endured enough without me heaping more on her.

When the sun finally rises in a burst of vivid yellows, oranges, and pinks, I schlep to the kitchen for coffee. My gaze snags on the mug Corinne used each morning. And I can't look at my sink without remembering her washing dishes, bopping to Daft Punk's "Get Lucky"—a hysterically appropriate song considering we fucked all night. If I close my eyes, I can still see her there, sunlight streaming onto her dark hair, illuminating the reds embedded in the rich, dark strands, bouncing as she scrubbed plates and sang under her breath.

Now she's like a ghost haunting my kitchen.

Fuck the coffee.

Stifling an exhausted sigh, I yank my phone from my pocket. Maybe I should text Corinne. Check on her. No, that's too impersonal. Maybe I should call instead. At six thirty in the morning? What are the odds she'll answer?

What if she's finally decided to get busy with Riley to prove I'm wrong about her feelings?

My gritty, sleep-deprived eyes slide shut. I keep torturing myself with that question. Stabbing myself would hurt less.

Should I have told her I love her? Maybe it would have made a difference...but probably not. She has feelings for me, but love? More than likely, I would have startled her. Or scared the fuck out of her. She came to me for help, not devotion.

So now what? I probably need a new job. And who's going to hire me after my public sexcapades? But I'm not even concerned about that. Thanks to my ambitions for the future, which I can probably flush down the toilet—though I haven't talked to Maxon and Griff yet—I have a lot of cash in reserve. My bigger problem is that I need a new heart. The one beating in my chest belongs to Corinne.

Worse, my cock is on the same bandwagon. A glance at my social media over the last few hours proved that some people will do any guy for a thrill. I've had propositions from all kinds, offering me everything from a hard fuck to the blow job of a lifetime. That bastard between my legs wasn't interested in the least, no matter how attractive or salacious the pictures accompanying the messages were.

I have no idea how I'll recover.

The sudden sound of the key in the lock has my head whipping around. Slowly, the door opens. A figure walks into the shadows of my foyer and pauses. The familiar curves and curls in silhouette stop my heart.

“Corinne?”

“You're up?” Her voice sounds scratchy and subdued. “If I woke you, I'm sorry.”

Hardly daring to breathe, I approach. “I couldn't sleep.”

She shuts the door behind her. “Neither could I.”

Hope reignites. “Listen, I'm sorry about last night. But giving up our scheme isn't the solution to our problem.”

She meets me halfway, standing just outside the first rays of dawn beaming through the back windows. But I can't see

her face. Has she been crying? Is she sad? Does she miss me at all?

I need to know.

Spinning around, I switch on the lamp on an adjacent hall table. It doesn't provide much light but enough to show me she's not merely been crying, but sobbing. Her bottom lip looks swollen, as if she's dug her teeth into it all night. And there's a love bite on the side of her neck. Did I leave that...or did Riley?

The question threatens to grind my composure to dust.

"I don't want to rehash this. Please." She swallows. "I'm sorry to barge in. I just came to collect the rest of my things. I didn't expect you to be awake."

Wait. She came at this hour because she didn't want to see me? "So you were just going to take your shit and go, no goodbye?"

"I thought it would be best if I packed up all my business-related stuff when I wouldn't disturb you."

That's a yes, and it hurts. "Then what?"

"I need to keep working. Orders are pouring in. I'm more behind than ever."

Having something to focus on is probably a welcome distraction, but that wasn't what I asked. "What about our plans? You're seriously going to give up, rather than let this nonsense blow over?"

"Nonsense? Is that what it feels like to you? Your clients don't think it is. Neither does your boss. The public doesn't seem to, either. I appreciate you trying to help me. Truly. But your courage and fortitude are wrecking you, and I can't allow that."

It's so like her to protect others, but I don't need her to worry about me. "So you're just going to let your brother win? You're going to let him hang on to your inheritance for nearly three more years and stifle your company's growth?"

She licks her lips nervously and looks away.

I freeze. There's something she's not telling me. "Corinne, are you going to let him do that?"

"No. I have another solution. Riley has agreed to loan me the money. I'm going back to the mainland with him tomorrow morning to finalize everything."

Pure betrayal floods my system. From one heartbeat to the next, my temper spikes, instantly volcanic. Fury scorches my restraint and manners. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Xavian, I—"

"You what? After everything we planned and did together, when the going got tough you slinked off with another man and took a better offer. Doesn't this sound fucking familiar?"

She rears back like I've slapped her. But that's how I goddamn feel. I've spent all night thinking how in love I am with Corinne Emerson and inventing ways to win her back. She used our time apart to secure the loan she wanted all along from the ex she still has feelings for.

Bravo, princess. You outplayed me. I should have known better...

Spinning away from her, I grab a glass sitting on the nearby kitchen island and hurl it across the room. It crashes into a cabinet before shattering all over the floor. The sound isn't nearly as satisfying as I'd hoped. It merely ramps up my teeth-gritting, fist-clenching wrath. I'd give just about anything to hit someone who deserves it. Riley and Parker come to mind.

Corinne's gasp has me whirling back. She's visibly shaken. "What do you want me to say? I'm doing what makes the most sense. You're ambitious, and I know how meaningful your ventures with your family are. I can't stand the thought that I've jeopardized—"

"But this is the part where I fuck off? I've been there and done that. But don't pretend this isn't about you." I prowl closer, relishing the way she backs up until she hits the counter behind her. "Are you getting back together with him, too? Did you spend last night in his bed?"

“It’s not like that.”

“Sure it’s not. But hey, I got the consolation prize of your V-card, so I got revenge and a little extra something on the side. I should be grateful, right?”

The rational part of my brain tells me I’m fucking up everything. I can’t assume the worst, then attack her for it. The enraged part doesn’t give a shit about anything except burning everything to the ground. I hurt, so she should, too. Never mind that she probably already does after being called some of the most demeaning names on the internet and derided for her sexuality.

Weren’t you the one who insisted on getting her off in public?

Yeah. And the blowback sucks. But I didn’t think she’d throw in the towel and leave me because of it.

I feel so fucking empty without her.

“That’s disgusting. You don’t need to slam me. I’m not Hadley.”

Yes, she is, only worse. Because I actually love her. In retrospect, I glommed onto Hadley because, for once, I could be not just a driven, too-smart-for-his-own-good fukboi, but a partner. A hero. A savior. The fact that Hadley had a banging body was a bonus. Her drive to succeed made her feel like a kindred spirit.

Corinne has all those same qualities—but she’s more. She’s soft and good and kind. She’s sensitive to others’ feelings. She tries to help and placate and make the world a better place. I admire the hell out of her for it. I want that sunshine in my life, filling my heart.

Of course, none of her virtues apply to me. Why should they? I’m the third-born bastard of a criminal the world branded a sociopath. I’m stuck in that shadow. My brief brush with happiness and light has been snatched away, leaving me in darkness once more.

It reinforces the fact that no woman actually wants me for me. Once Corinne got a few orgasms and her ex’s attention,

she didn't need me anymore, so she sayonara'd off. And I feel fucking blindsided. Like a fool, I never saw her goodbye coming.

"Answer the question," I snap. "Did you fuck him?"

"No."

The relief I want to feel doesn't come. "Are you going to marry him?"

She hesitates. "He wants to get back together. Seeing me with you made him realize that breaking things off with me was a mistake."

"Isn't that convenient?"

She sends me a shaky sigh. "Please don't make this harder. The loan is contingent on me severing all ties with you."

That sends my already stratospheric temper into outer space.

"Where is that motherfucker?" I snarl.

"Confronting him won't solve anything. This is a sensible solution that allows you to cut me loose, get back to your job and your pending ventures with your family, and go on with the life you had before I messed everything up."

Fuck that. I don't want what I had before. I want what I felt when Corinne was mine.

But she's telling me in every way possible—politely, of course—that I need to stop holding on to us. For her, we were never real.

"Yeah. Fine. I'll do that." I shoulder my way past her and head for the liquor cabinet in my living room. "Get your stuff and go."

"Wait." She wraps her fingers around my arm, her touch like fire. It stops me in my tracks. "Xavian..."

I'm afraid to turn back to her. Inside, I'm an incendiary mix of agony and rage, underpinned by a sickening feeling that history is repeating itself, only worse. "What?"

“I’m not sure why you’re angry with me. I’m releasing you from this agreement that messed up your life so terribly. Don’t you get it? If we break up publicly and I return to LA, you can issue an apology. I’ll do the same, and I’ll start taking the steps to grow my business. I’ll focus all my social media on that. You can focus yours on business, on family, and on your”—she drags in a shaking breath—“social life. Just like you did before.”

Fuck hiding my hurt. Maybe Corinne needs to see it, even if she thinks I’m a pussy. Even if she makes fun of me for getting my feelings hurt. Even if she doesn’t give a single shit. “You mean when I fucked a different woman nearly every night because I didn’t think any one of them would ever want me for more? Because I was so goddamn lonely that I talked myself into believing that someone touching me, even if they didn’t know my name, was better than no one touching me at all?”

Her big dark eyes tear up. “Don’t ever think that. Any woman would be beyond lucky to have you.”

“Just not you.” I yank from her soft grasp. “I wish you all the best, princess.”

That full bottle of whiskey is calling my name and I suddenly have an overwhelming desire to answer. Fuck that, to drown.

“Same to you.” Suddenly, I hear the *tink* of something metallic on the nearby counter. She sets my house key on the gleaming surface. The engagement ring I settled on her finger a few short days ago wobbles just beside it.

The sight rips out my heart.

“I’ll send for the rest of my things, and I’ll let you know if I’m pregnant,” she murmurs. “I hope you fulfill your dreams and achieve everything you’ve ever wanted.”

Suddenly, she lays a gossamer kiss on my cheek. In that moment, I’m terrified that if I let Corinne go, I’ll never touch—hell, even see—her again.

Whirling to her, I grab her shoulders and pin her to the nearby cabinet. She lets out a startled gasp—a sound I swallow by slanting my lips over hers and barging my way into her mouth. It’s desperate. I *feel* desperate.

Corinne stiffens, splaying her hands against my chest as if she means to push me away. Frantically, I cup her nape, sink deeper, and tangle my tongue against hers. She releases the breath she’s holding, exhaling with me, then melts against me, giving me her tongue. Her hands follow suit, creeping from my chest to curl around my shoulders before she pulls me closer. The whimper at the back of her throat lights the powder keg of my desire.

The sudden honking of a car horn has her leaping away, startled fingers pressed to her lips. She stares at me like she’s made a grave mistake. “I’m sorry.”

Why is she apologizing when I kissed her? “Who’s honking?”

Corinne skitters back out of the kitchen. “Riley is waiting for me. I’ve got to go.”

And she’s running out on me because that asshole beckoned curbside?

Yes, because he’s funding her business and she’s choosing the safe, familiar option.

“You’re going to let him dictate whether I see you again?”

Her eyes mist over again. “I think it’s for the best...but I’ll never forget you.”

The catch in her whisper rips out my heart as she lets herself out the front door and closes it behind her with a final, quiet click.

I pound my fist into the nearest wall, then wrench open the liquor cabinet, ripping the lid off the bottle.

My life will never be the same without her.



I don't even know what fucking time it is when the ringing of my phone jerks me out of my stupor. The glare through the living room window blinds me with the fact the sun is about to set. In one hand, I grip the neck of the whiskey bottle that's now mostly empty. In the other, I'm holding my vibrating phone.

The last ten hours of my life are gone. I have no idea what happened.

All I know is that Corinne isn't coming back, and I don't know how I'll ever recover.

The cell continues to jangle. With a curse, I slam the bottle on the coffee table. My head pounds. My mouth feels like a fuzzy rodent crawled onto my tongue and died. My head throbs like someone beat it with a hammer.

That's nothing compared to the agony in my chest.

Since I'm too bleary-eyed to read the display, I scowl as I answer whoever this disruptive bastard is. "What?"

"Hey, Costa. Sorry it's taken me longer than expected to get this information to you. But I hope you're sitting down. You're going to love this."

Owen, the PI. Vaguely, my brain recognizes his voice. But between Corinne and my colossal drunkfest, I can't remember what he was investigating.

"Put it in an email. I'll read it in the morning."

"Are you sure? Last time we talked, you seemed pretty adamant that you wanted everything I could dig up on Riley Stephens ASAP. I got the dirt—and then some."

That's right. I did ask Owen for that cocksucker's secrets. Unfortunately, it's too late for them to make a difference.

"For instance..." he goes on. "I found out that he stopped making his student loan payments a little over a year ago."

I shouldn't care. But unsolved puzzles and things that don't make sense bug the shit out of me. How is Riley going to lend Corinne money if he can't pay his own bills? Still... "He's not the only person struggling to settle that debt."

“Nope, but he’s the only person having his payments made on their behalf every single month for the last year by Parker Emerson.”

That tidbit bolts me up from my slouch on the sofa. “No shit?”

Why would Parker do that? The answer is right there. My whiskey-soaked brain just can’t unravel it.

“No shit. Last year, Stephens returned the engagement ring he bought for Corinne on a Saturday. Emerson made the first loan payment for him three days later. He’s been making them since.”

In other words, after Parker was assured Riley ended things with Corinne? That controlling prick bribed her ex to break up with her? Not that I put it past Parker to throw his cash around, but holy fuck. Riley took the buyout and walked away from Corinne? It sure looks that way.

But the bigger question is why the son of a bitch has suddenly returned, offering her cash...

“What’s his bank balance?” I bark at Owen.

“About three thousand bucks. He’s got a 401k that’s tanking and a modest savings account his grandfather left him. With his car and the apartment he bought in New York, he’s probably worth a hundred grand.”

So where the fuck is Riley coming up with the five million to lend Corinne?

There’s only one answer that makes sense.

If Parker was able to pay Riley to go away, he could just as easily bribe the schmuck to come back. They’re both taking advantage of Corinne’s tender heart and lingering feelings in different ways.

I stand, figuring out how quickly I can shower, sober up enough to get in my car, and race across the island to find her—wherever she is. She deserves to know she’s being deceived by two assholes who claim to love her.

Then I remember she thinks it's "sensible" if we're no longer together. She doesn't want me to care about her anymore.

"Do you know where he's staying?" I can't stop myself from asking, even if there's no point because I can't beat down his door and pound in his face—though I'd love to.

"Stephens? Same hotel as Parker Emerson." He rattles off the name of a ritzy resort on the beach.

"Isn't that a coincidence?"

Owen snorts. "Since Emerson is paying for both rooms? No."

"How fucking like Parker." I thought all along that Riley's reason for being on the island made no sense, and I was right.

My heart might be broken, but my bullshit meter is still working.

"I'm guessing he brought in the ex to break you two up."

That's my read. I'm fucking pissed that it worked. Which brings me back to what I do with the information Owen just laid in my lap.

If I tried to tell Corinne, would she even listen?

"Do you have proof?"

Owen scoffs. "What do you think? I'm a professional. I would never call with this information if I couldn't back it up."

Hope, that ever-optimistic bastard, rekindles inside me. My inner cynic smothers it. Corinne doesn't want me or the carnival ride I've made of her life. But I love that goddamn woman. If I can keep her from stepping into her brother's trap and hooking up—or god forbid, settling down—with his puppet, I'll at least have done what I can to make sure she has a happy future.

"Send it to me."

"Already in your inbox. Anything else?"

I don't think so, but... "Be on standby, just in case."

"You got it. By the way, as a bonus for being a repeat customer, I've got another tidbit for you. Parker hooked up—and cheated on his girlfriend—with that gorgeous blonde from the big-screen rompy romcoms." He rattles off the name of a famous actress most every heterosexual guy I know would like to bang. "She told her assistant and a few close friends he's a lousy lay."

That makes me laugh, mostly because it fits. Before Hadley's grand exit, she admitted that, as a lover, Parker was a selfish douche who didn't ring her bell. Funny that some things never change.

"Do I want to know how you found that out?"

"You don't. Just be grateful." Owen laughs. "Call me if you need me."

After we hang up, I sprawl back on the sofa, bouncing my phone on my knee and wondering what the fuck I do with all this information.

With a sigh, I open my emails, take screen shots of the information Owen collected that prove every assertion, and paste the information into a text to Corinne. At worst, she'll ignore me. At best... No, I can't dive headfirst into some stupid fantasy where she comes back, throws her arms around me, and tells me she loves me. I'll drive myself crazy.

I hit the send button. Nothing happens. No delivery confirmation. No indication she's read my message. No reply. Minutes tick by. Nothing changes.

I can only come to one conclusion: Corinne blocked me.

What the fuck? Did Riley put her up to that, another stipulation before he supposedly loans her the cash? Or did she decide she needs me out of her life forever?

Yeah, that makes the most sense, and I have to stop trying to rationalize ways in which the last twelve hours haven't been about her cutting me loose.

Son of a bitch.

I reach for the last quarter of the whiskey bottle. “Why the fuck not? Hair of the dog and all that. Bottoms up.”

Grimacing the whole way, I chug the rest. I haven’t had anything to eat since last night, so the booze crashes into my empty stomach. The buzz lights me up fast. The pain of her departure dulls over again, but it’s still there like a nagging toothache.

My head lolls back against the couch. I stare at the ceiling as the room grows darker. My phone rings a couple of times, but it’s not Corinne. I don’t give a fuck who else is calling.

I’m not even sure how much time has passed when someone starts pounding on my door. Whoever it is doesn’t bother with the doorbell. This isn’t a delicate knock, but a ham-fisted banging without any consideration for the fact my head is fucking throbbing.

Cursing, I lurch to my feet, swaying more than standing, and somehow manage to stumble to the front door. Pouring back more booze before I even managed to get sober probably wasn’t my best idea, but at least I don’t feel like someone reached their bare hand into my chest and yanked out my heart anymore. Well, not totally.

The knocking thunders through the house, reverberating in my head again. If this is a door-to-door solicitor, I’m going to kick some ass.

“Xavian? Open up!”

I’d know that voice anywhere. “Jesus, hold your horses, Maxon. I’m getting there.”

Not in a straight line and not quickly, but whatever.

After a couple of missed tries, I finally grab the knob, unlock my front door, and wrench it open. Not only is my oldest brother standing on my porch wearing a scowl that tells me he’s pissed, but a very unhappy Griff stands beside him. Harlow scowls at me from between them.

There’s going to be yelling. My head is ready to revolt. My stomach... Probably better not to think about that.

“What?” I bark.

One thing I know about this family? Everyone is passionate, opinionated, and temperamental. If I can't find the balls to hold my own against whatever's brought them here, they'll run me over until I'm nothing but a stain on the asphalt. Then they'll tell me it's for my own good.

“What the hell happened?” Harlow demands, shoving me back so she can step into my foyer.

I nearly stumble onto my ass. “Why don't you just come on in?”

“Fuck, he's drunk,” Griff mutters.

“What was your first clue?” I slur back.

Maxon sighs and lets himself in. “We need to talk.”

Griff follows suit, then shuts the door behind him. “Now.”

Hell, no. “If you're here about what happened at the club last night, rest assured I've already had my ass chewed.”

“Bethany told us,” Maxon clarifies. “She feels bad. So do we. I know Griff and I told you to take Corinne out and show her off, but we didn't tell you to simulate sex in a booth where the whole damn club could roll video.”

“I already know I took it too far. Corinne agrees. That's why she fucking left me.”

Griff winces. “We saw. It's all over social media. Someone caught footage of her racing through the lobby of the Aston at two o'clock this morning with Riley's arm around her. Speculation is everywhere that she's gone back to him.”

“Her engagement ring is on the kitchen counter,” Harlow calls across the house.

When the hell did my sister disappear to start snooping?

“Yep. I ruined everyone's life. But she's convinced now that everything turned out rosy since her ex is going to loan her the money she needs.” I snort. “So she said *hasta la vista*. Our fake engagement is over. And poof, she's gone.”

“It was fake?” Harlow pops her head around the corner, brow raised.

Shit. I forgot my sister didn’t know, but hiding the truth isn’t important anymore. “All of it.”

“Except the part where you fell in love with her?” Griff asks.

“How the hell did you know?” I scowl.

Maxon snorts. “Experience. Besides, there’s no other reason a guy gets as shitfaced as you are after a woman leaves.”

“What’s worse is that she left me for an asshole who doesn’t love her, who’s bought and paid for by that fucking brother of hers.” I explain the situation, trying not to stumble over my words. “Not that she’ll ever know because”—I glance at my phone again, which still doesn’t show my message was ever delivered—“yep, she blocked me.”

Maxon and Griff exchange a scowl.

Harlow merely snorts and saunters toward us. “So that’s it? You’re just going to give up?”

“Corinne made herself pretty clear. She. Doesn’t. Want. Me. She doesn’t love me, either. So you three should take your judgmental, sanctimonious stares some fucking place else and let me wallow in peace.”

Maxon sighs. “You’re usually a witty drunk. Funny. Happy. Now you’re just sappy, sloppy, and sad.”

“Pardon me for not living up to your expectations. It was only a matter of time before I disappointed you, too. It’s why Corinne didn’t want me. Hadley didn’t, either. Hell, even the old man blew me off before I came into the world.”

My oldest brother grabs me by my hastily donned shirt, which I apparently put on backward some drunken hours ago, then pulls me into a tight hug. “Everyone who matters in this family wants you. That’s why we fucking hired an investigator to find you. That’s why we persuaded you to move to Maui. That’s why we pursued going into business with you.”

“Bethany changed her mind.”

“Clint and I talked her off the ledge,” Griff assures me. “She was just scared, doing her mama-bear how-am-I-going-to-feed-my-babies thing. We’ve talked through a strategy to restore the reputation of the brokerage. An apology, some groveling, followed by good behavior. And time. It *will* go away.”

“He’s right.” Maxon pulls back and looks me in the eye. “But don’t ever think we don’t want you around. And don’t you dare give that asshole who gave us half our DNA another thought.”

“He didn’t want any of his kids except as trophies.” Harlow approaches on soft footfalls.

Since she never does anything quietly, the gesture catches my attention. “What do you mean?”

The three of them exchange a long, weighty glance.

Maxon is the first to break the silence. “He pitted Griff and me against one another from the time we were little. As a teenager, I failed to live up to his cutthroat expectations. He ridiculed and belittled me until the day he died.”

“I managed to live up to his fucked-up notions of a good son, and I lost myself so completely, it nearly cost me everything,” Griff admits.

“Don’t ask how he treated his daughters, just be grateful you didn’t grow up with Barclay.”

“But we understand the scars you’re carrying,” Maxon insists. “The doubt, the worry, the anxiety that—deep down—you’re unlovable. Every one of his adult children gets it.”

I swallow back a sudden tightness in my throat. Yeah, I knew their childhoods hadn’t been all smiles and rainbows, but this is the most honest they’ve ever been about their pasts.

“We’ve all suffered in relationships because of him, too.” Harlow sends me an unexpectedly gentle expression. It’s not pity; it’s understanding.

Why is that fucking threatening to undo me? I swallow against the sting in my eyes and glare at them all when I really want to thank them for baring themselves. “What did you do?”

“To get over it?” Griff shrugs. “Understanding. Time. Love. I would still be a hot-tempered, fucked-up manwhore if Britta hadn’t taken me back.”

Maxon nods. “I would still be a miserable, angry workaholic, drinking my dinner and fucking a different woman every night if Keeley hadn’t come along and made me look at myself through a lens other than our father’s.”

I can see on their faces that their respective battles were hard-fought and brutal. But as much as I appreciate their honesty, I don’t know how it helps me.

Corrine is gone, and she won’t even let me tell her what a horrible mistake she’s making.

“You’d be horrified to hear what a mess I was before Noah. I was willing to marry a man I didn’t love, who wasn’t even faithful to me, because I was convinced it didn’t matter. In my head, the institution of marriage was rotten to the core and the best anyone could hope for was a spouse they didn’t want to murder. Since my ex-fiancé traveled constantly, I figured he’d be as good a husband as any. It took a humiliating wake-up call and meeting Noah to make me see I was selling myself short.”

“That’s great. Happy as hell it worked out for you all. It’s not going to for me. Corinne went back to her ex. You got that part, right?”

“And you’re just going to let that stand? You’re not going to fight for her?” Griff looks at me like I’m insane.

“What’s the point? I was the only idiot who thought that what we had was real.”

Harlow shakes her head. “I watched her last night. She’s nowhere near immune to you. Besides, those pictures circulating all over social media of her arriving at the hotel with Riley show her crying. She wouldn’t waste tears on you if she didn’t care.”

I'm dying to believe that. I just don't.

"Harlow is right. You think love came easy for any of us?" Griff challenges. "That it just landed in our laps and wrapped around us like a warm, fuzzy blanket, making us feel all secure about our futures? No. I had to threaten and grovel at the same time just to get Britta to listen."

My sister nods. "It wasn't pretty. He still didn't know if they were actually getting married the morning of their wedding. And Noah, bless him... He fought for me every day. He fought my attitude, my fears, my disdain for love and marriage. He never once gave up, and somewhere in my thick skull I finally realized he never would, because no matter how much I denied it, he knew I loved him, too."

"Exactly," Maxon agrees. "And I... Well, you all know I have a little control freak in me."

"A little?" Griff laughs. "That's an understatement."

"Of the decade, at least," Harlow adds.

I nod. "They're right."

Maxon clears his throat. "I had to give Keeley free rein over our future. To prove I meant it, I sang in public for her. Microphone, audience, the whole nine yards."

"Damn..." I've only heard my oldest brother sing "Happy Birthday" in a crowd, but that was cringy enough.

"You see? We've all fought. I'm sure Bethany and Clint have told you about their rocky start."

The one where he lied about his name and pretended to be a friend and co-worker so he could seduce her for revenge? "Yeah."

"Don't think that didn't take all kinds of hustle on his part to earn her trust again."

"Months of it," Griff assures me.

"And Evan was just crazy. He took out a personal ad for a wife, even though Nia had been in love with him for years. After that, he had to work like hell to prove that he was all in

with her,” Harlow puts in. “Love might not have been easy for any of us, but having it has been priceless.”

They aren’t listening, damn it. “She left. If I keep chasing her, don’t I look like the creepy stalker guy who can’t take no for an answer?”

“Maybe,” Maxon acknowledges. “Do you care more about that than having her back?”

“No.” And that’s not really my objection. I’m afraid to have my heart ripped out for good. Hadley bruised it, but Corinne... “I don’t know if I can handle her shutting me out again.”

But...I’m already hurting. What more do I have to lose? And if I truly love her, shouldn’t I do everything possible to warn her that her ex and her brother are conning her? It might not change how she feels about me, but if her future is happier, even if that’s without me, that’s more important.

“You can,” Maxon swears. “You’re made of strong stuff. You’re a Reed. Maybe take a shower so you smell less like whatever the fuck you’ve been drinking. But if you put on your big-boy pants and tell her how you feel, that just might be enough to win her back.”

He’s being overly optimistic. But I have to warn her.

“I’m too drunk to drive.”

“We got you.” Griff claps my shoulder. “We’ll take you over there and be your backup.”

“Not me,” Harlow cuts in. “I have to go home and breastfeed. Besides, I won’t look too menacing with milk stains.”

I refuse to look down and see if my sister’s shirt is already wet. “You won’t. Go. And thanks for the pep talk.”

Because I know them, I know opening up wasn’t easy.

She grins. “You look a little green. Is that the alcohol or talking about my boobs?”

“Both.” I wince.

Everyone laughs.

“You got this. I promise,” Harlow adds, serious once more. “I’ll let you in on a secret... Girls like her don’t orgasm in public for a guy they’re not crazy about. So if worse comes to worst, take her to bed until she can’t say no anymore. It worked for Noah.”

I didn’t need to know that. “Harlow...”

She chortles. “You’re even greener. It’s hysterical.”

“Fuck you,” I groan.

“Love you, too.” She kisses me on the cheek, then heads for the door. “Call me once she’s said yes.”

I’m not convinced that will ever happen, but they’re right. If I want any chance at a future with Corinne, I have to keep fighting for her. Everyone she’s ever loved has abandoned her in some way or another. I can’t do the same and expect her to trust me. I have to show her I’ll be there, no matter what—even if she hurts me.

And if it doesn’t change her mind...I’ll keep trying until she does.

“We will,” Maxon promises. “Now get out of here before you make us all puke.”

With a final wink, my sister leaves. My brothers give me matching expectant stares.

I race to my bedroom, take the quickest shower in history, and brush my damn teeth. Then, feeling almost human, I swipe the car keys off the counter, assure Maxon and Griff that I’m sober and I’ll be fine flying solo, then rush off to throw my heart on the line one last time.

chapter THIRTEEN

Dark envelops me as I race down the highway at breakneck speeds. It's a miracle I don't get pulled over.

During my drive, I prepare all I can. I have to think smart if I want Corinne to dump Riley—and not because I prove he's Parker's lap dog but because she *chooses* me.

After the last eighteen hours, it's a tall fucking order.

A slew of calls later, I'm ready. Thanks to Owen, I have Riley's room number at the posh resort he can't afford. I also get the unhappy news that, as far as the PI can tell, Corinne never checked in separately. She's staying with her goddamn ex. Even if they didn't fuck last night, tonight's a new opportunity to get down and dirty.

I'm putting a stop to that. If I have my way, that sellout son of a bitch will never touch her again.

The drive seems to take both twenty hours and a nanosecond. Finally, I screech into the parking lot, slam on my brakes in front of the valet stand, and toss the attendant in a loud Hawaiian shirt my keys.

Since I know the layout of this hotel, it doesn't take me long to find Riley's room.

I raise my fist and pound on the door. *If* the fucking bastard answers, he'll likely try to slam it in my face, but I've got a strategy. He's not bigger than me, and he's not smarter than me. He definitely doesn't have right on his side.

Instead, Corinne opens the door, her long hair in a messy bun. She's dressed in some of the unsexiest pajamas I've ever seen—green with white stripes covering everything from her neck to her ankles. The shirt is emblazoned with an animated teddy-bear face from some childhood cartoon I vaguely remember. It's obvious she cried off most of her makeup and

removed what little was left. Her eyes are as swollen as that bruised lower lip she keeps chewing. She looks miserable.

I'm dying to hold her. But she stands firmly in the doorway, preventing any semblance of intimacy.

"What are you doing here?" she breathes.

"Making a few more things clear to you."

She sighs tiredly. "Xavian—"

"Are we alone?" I'm not letting her shut me down before I've even said a word.

"Yes. Riley went to get himself some food. I wasn't hungry."

He left her alone when she's more upset than I've ever seen her. *What a bastard...*

But his absence is an unexpected boon. And a smart man knows when to capitalize on his advantages. I've been called an asshole a lot, but never stupid.

"Let me in so we can talk."

Corinne hesitates, her stare clinging to me like a kid through a candy store window. But she shakes her head. "We've said everything that needs to be said."

"Wrong." Since this isn't the first time I've been pushy and it won't be the last, I nudge her aside and stalk into the room, pulling the door from her grasp and letting it slam shut behind me.

Riley's suitcase sits in one corner on a rack. Hers is spread out on a chair on the opposite side. There are two queen beds and they both look slept in. As far as I'm concerned, that's a victory.

She gasps. "You shouldn't be here."

"Because Riley might catch us?"

She shakes her head. "Because we just hurt each other."

That alarms the fuck out of me. "I hurt you?"

"The things you said earlier—"

“Weren’t meant to upset you. They were meant to make you think.”

“They did.” She frowns like the memory is too painful. “About things I never should.”

My heart starts racing. “Like what?”

“Like...things between us weren’t fake.”

Her body language is telling me to back off, but my gut screams that’s the worst thing I could do. Now I just have to swallow my fear that Corinne will never want me for me and man up. “For me, none of it was. Ever.”

Her lips part in shock. “Don’t say things you don’t mean. I can’t handle...”

Tears start falling, ripping me apart. I step into her personal space, take her face in hand, and stoop down until I’m looking her straight in the eye. “I mean it, with every part of my body, especially my heart.”

That only makes her cry more. “No, you don’t.”

She’s not calling me a liar; she’s afraid to believe. I see it all over her face.

Hope surges hard. “I do. And I’m going to prove it.”

“Stop. Please.” She closes her big, dark eyes against me. “You wanted revenge and you got it. Don’t play games with me.”

“I’m not playing anything. I don’t give a fuck about revenge anymore. If I did, I would have released the video I have of Parker confronting us at our engagement party.”

That gets her attention. “You have video?”

I nod. “It’s stored on my cloud if you want to see it. Every word, including the part where your brother admits to fucking my ex-fiancée behind my back. I could have sent that to the world and changed the conversation three days ago if all I wanted was revenge. But I didn’t.”

“Why?”

She can't guess? "Because as much as I'd love for him to get the public spanking he deserves, I hated the things he said about you. I didn't want you being hurt more than he already had. And this will probably sound crazy after the incident at the club, but I never wanted people to gossip about you; I just wanted them to believe in us."

"Oh, my gosh."

"The video is on my cloud. It will stay there forever if you want."

She drags in a shaky breath. "You're giving up a lot."

"I'm not giving up a fucking thing I don't want to." I lift her face, willing her to look at me again. "The day you first came into my office, I was seething with the need to get back at your brother. I would have dropped that video on TMZ and walked away from you, too, if all I cared about was payback. But I stopped giving a shit about that days ago. There's only one reason. Surely you can figure it out, princess."

Corinne's big eyes focus on me. I see hope. I see fear. She wants to believe me, but... "Xavian?"

"You need me to spell it out for you?"

"Please."

I stand straight, backing her against the nearby wall until every inch of my body is pressed against hers, until I reduce her field of vision to nothing but me. "I love you."

Her bottom lip trembles. More tears fall down her cheeks. But she doesn't say a word.

Because she still doesn't believe me? Or because it doesn't matter?

"It's the truth, princess. People have left you all your life? I never will. They've withheld their love to manipulate you? I won't. They've put you last? You'll never be anything but first for me. That's a promise." I pull a scrap of paper from my pocket and hand it to her. "This is for you. No strings. No expectations."

She takes it with trembling fingers and scans it. Her eyes go wide. “A check. For five million dollars? Why? I don’t—”

“You know exactly why. I just told you. Don’t be afraid to believe me.”

“B-but...isn’t this the money you saved to go into business with your family?”

I nod. “For the record, Bethany and Clint calmed down and called me about an hour ago to tell me that, if we can get the messaging right on my apology, they want to proceed with the partnership. Maxon and Griff never backed out of our planned venture. But I believe in *you*, in what you’re doing, in your passion for the pieces you create. So I want you to have this outright. It’s not a loan. I don’t expect any part of your company in return. I just want you to succeed.”

“You’re serious?” I can’t tell whether she thinks I’m her knight in shining armor or I’m crazy. Maybe both.

“It’s all yours.”

She shakes her head. “I-I can’t take your future from you.”

“You’re not. I’m *giving* it to you. I can make more money and I have time to invest in me. I’d rather invest in you first.”

A sob wracks her. She presses a hand to her chest and the way she looks at me, like I’m her everything... My heart seizes up.

Maybe I have a sliver of a chance with her. I’m fucking going to press forward.

With my heart pounding, I settle a finger under her chin and lift her tear-stained face, making her meet my stare as I reach into my pocket again. “One more thing.”

“This is already too much. I can’t—” I hold up the engagement ring I first slipped on her finger, and she gasps. “Xavian?”

Her eyes have gone so big. I had this whole speech planned about how we belong together and that I intend to do my best every single day to make her happy. But I suddenly

get tongue-tied. I can only manage to say the most important part.

“Marry me, princess.”

“What?” she breathes like she can’t possibly have heard me right.

“Marry me.”

She bites that lip again as her expression falls into something both horrified and sad. “But I ruined your life.”

“No. Only you leaving me could do that.” I lift the ring closer. “What do you say? Can I put this on your finger?”

Corinne opens her mouth, still gaping. “Did you actually b-buy that?”

I nod, trying to stay calm. She hasn’t said yes...but she hasn’t said no, either. “About twenty minutes ago. It’s yours. I want you to wear it. I want you to say I do. I want to fill you up with babies so we can make a family of our own. I want you to be mine forever.”

To my right, the click of the latch warns me we have company.

Riley shuffles in and takes one look at us. His eyes narrow. He drops the styrofoam container that smells like cheeseburger and rushes toward me. Clearly, he’s pissed I’m here. And when his gaze falls on the engagement ring in my grip, his scowl deepens.

Tough shit. I’m not leaving until Corinne answers me.

“You’re not marrying her, you bastard! Get the fuck out of my room and away from her. Or I’ll ruin you.”



Corinne

My head is reeling. How did everything come to this?

The last twenty-four hours have been some of the worst—and yet some of the best—of my life. Riley battering his way back into the hotel room falls into the former category. Xavian proposing is definitely in the latter. I'm still stunned.

Xavian did ask me to marry him, right? I wasn't dreaming?

Mouth curled in a snarl, Riley glares at us angrily. I had no idea my ex even had a temper.

Without hesitation, Xavian slides me behind him, sheltering me from Riley's unexpected wrath. It's not the first time he's been protective. If I say yes to his proposal, I suspect he'll always be possessive. That should not give me flutters...

It does.

"You can't touch me, you fucking cockroach," Xavian growls back. "This is between Corinne and me. Get out or I'll destroy you."

Riley crosses his arms over his chest. "This is *my* room."

In that instant, I'm struck by the difference between them. Riley raised his voice, and he looks annoyed for sure. But he hasn't reached for me. He hasn't tried to reclaim me. He's hardly even looked at me. Xavian, despite the one being threatened, is furious, aggressive, incredibly alpha, and seemingly ready to battle Riley to the death to protect me.

Maybe that's a metaphor.

In that moment, I grasp what Xavian tried to make me understand in the shower. He was fighting for me—for us—pushing back against my preconceived notions, my insecurities, and the lies I've been telling myself about the kind of man I truly want.

He was right about everything.

I'd convinced myself that I belonged with Riley because he seemed safe. Because he didn't strike me as the type who would abandon me. I didn't believe in myself enough to strive for a lover who lit me on fire, body and soul. I didn't dare even flirt with someone like that. I was settling for lackluster because I was too afraid to believe I could have more—

especially last night, when I was caught up in all my forbidden feels for Xavian. I argued instead of listening. I gave in to fear instead of hoping. Instead of fighting with him for us.

And for what? Riley didn't care about me enough to pursue our future a year ago. Whatever his rationale for returning the engagement ring he bought doesn't matter. He made his choice. I don't care why he wants me back now.

He didn't love me enough then. And I don't love him now.

"Is the room *really* yours?" Xavian asks sharply. "Think carefully before you answer."

What is he getting at?

I'm shocked when Riley turns to me, suddenly looking scared. "He's full of lies, and he's trying to tear us apart so he can keep using you for his revenge. Don't believe anything he says."

Warning bells peal in my head. If I'm honest, they've been pinging since I arrived at the hotel eighteen hours ago. First, when Riley made a big production out of helping me from the Uber with my suitcase and tourists just happened to be standing by with their phones to video the moment. Then through the ensuing hours when, despite my tears, he barely held me, almost like he was afraid to touch me. And when I asked him why he decided to leave me last year but is now suddenly so eager to get back together, he didn't have an answer. Well, not one that made sense. After Xavian's question, Riley's defensiveness makes me even more suspicious. Because my former fake fiancé might be a stubborn, brash, in-your-face, sexy-as-hell alpha male, but he's never been a liar.

I'm starting to think Riley has.

"Shut up," I snap.

My ex rears back, probably because I've never said a cross word to him. "You can't possibly believe him. He hates your brother and would do anything to take Parker down."

"Since when do you care about my brother?" He and Riley met once while we dated. Parker disliked him on sight because

he wasn't good enough. It was always a source of friction between me and Riley.

“We both agree this guy”—he gestures to Xavian—“is scum. And he isn't right for you.” He rips the check from my hand and scans it before he scoffs. “You don't need his money. I already told you I'd lend you the funds. I'll even forgive the debt once we're married.”

Married? That's the first time he's mentioned wedding bells. Why is he suddenly gung ho to get hitched? Because he loves me...or because Xavian asked? “He didn't lend me the money; he gave it to me.”

“He's trying to buy you. You're too smart to let him.” Riley scowls. “Aren't you?”

Is he trying to manipulate me? “How is what you're doing better?”

My ex frowns like my question is an insult. “I can't believe you even have to ask.”

“I'm trying to understand. It's important.”

“I-I...” He glances around—groping for a response?—and blusters. “I'd be happy to discuss my feelings for you. Tell him to leave and we'll talk.” He turned to Xavian. “If you don't go, I'm calling hotel security.”

“It's better if he stays so we get everything out in the open.”

Riley's face closes up. “I'd rather keep what's in my heart between us.”

“Why? I have no problem telling Corinne—and the world—that I love her,” Xavian lobs with a smile. “How about you?”

Riley dismisses him with a wave. “It's easy to spew lies.”

“You would know.” Xavian grins acidly.

I turn to him. “Do you know something I don't?”

He waves me away. “You're doing a good job figuring out his bullshit. Carry on.”

No idea what Xavian is getting at. I'll sort that out as soon as I deal with Riley. "It should also be easy to tell someone you care about them...if it's the truth."

My ex-boyfriend's expression turns thunderous. "This jackass has turned you into someone you're not. You used to be modest, sweet, and nonconfrontational. Now look at you. Orgasms in public. Arguing. Questioning my feelings. Can't you see how much I care? I'm not in Hawaii because work sent me. I'm here for you."

"But only after someone else wanted me. And you lied to me." Like Xavian intimated. Has Riley always been a little shady? Why didn't I ever look deeper?

Because Xavian was right. I was too afraid—to ask for more, to look too hard, to believe in myself and stand firm that I deserve better.

"I didn't *lie*," Riley defends. "I just didn't tell you the truth because—"

"By definition that is a lie," Xavian points out.

"Butt out, Costa." My ex grits his teeth. "This is between Corinne and me."

"No, Xavian is right. I'm seeing clearly for the first time. You know what? It doesn't matter why you broke up with me last year."

"I told you, I was confused. I made a mistake. I've had time to think—"

"Is that the only reason?" Xavian questions.

"Shut the fuck up," Riley snarls.

"Whatever your excuse, it boils down to the fact you didn't love me," I tell Riley. "I don't think you love me now, either. I'm not convinced you ever will. And that's not enough for me."

My ex looks stunned. "What are you saying? That you're choosing *him*?"

Did he really just ask that? “You care more that I might say yes to Xavian than the fact I said no to you?”

Xavian wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me close, dropping a kiss onto my nose. “Look at you go. I knew there was a reason I love you. Sweet and smart.” He drops his voice to murmur for my ears only, “And hot in bed.”

I tsk at him, but he just grins from ear to ear.

Riley gives me a condescending groan. “You’re being bamboozled. And you’re making a huge mistake.”

“It’s my mistake to make. And I think I should go.”

My ex steps between me and the door. “You belong here.”

“I don’t.”

Xavian smiles at me proudly. “When you’re ready, I’ll take you away.”

Since I’d love that more than anything, I nod and head toward my suitcase. “I’ll get my things.”

“Don’t forget. You still owe me an answer, princess.”

To his proposal? “When we’re alone.”

He nods as I shove all my clothes in my bag. When I head to the bathroom to grab my toiletries, I pass Riley, who’s not looking at me like I’ve broken his heart. He’s tapping frantically on his phone, not sparing me a single glance.

I’m making the right decision. I feel it in my bones, and I’m finally confident enough to know that.

“Bringing in reinforcements?” Xavian asks Riley cryptically. “Think carefully before you do. It won’t end well.”

My ex hits send, then glares at him. “Fuck you. You’re not getting away with this.”

“Okay, what’s going on?” As I dump the last of my bathroom items into my suitcase, I turn to Xavian. “What do you know that I don’t?”

He shakes his head. “I didn’t want this. I mean, I was looking forward to ratting out this asshole.” He gestures to

Riley. “But the rest of this shit show...”

In the next instant, the door crashes open, sending Riley stumbling forward. My brother bursts inside.

“Just arrived.” Xavian sighs.

How is Parker here? Why is he here? Did he know I was here? I’m confused... I’m even more confused about the fact no one else is confused. In fact, no one else looks shocked in the least.

Then it hits me. Riley was texting my brother...like they’re working together? And Parker came running. To what end?

To separate me from Xavian. The answer is so obvious I can’t believe I didn’t think of it sooner.

I’m not an angry person. I don’t scream or yell or insist on getting my point across to people too stubborn or mean to hear it. But I’ve put up with my brother’s controlling crap for too long.

I’m done. It stops now.

“How dare you!”

“Me? You’re the one choosing Xavian. You can’t marry him!” Parker insists, grabbing my arm and tugging.

Before I can tell my brother to back off, Xavian breaks his hold on me and lunges in Parker’s face. “You don’t ever touch her again.”

“Or what? Don’t threaten me. I have other ways of ruining you.”

That warning pings around in my brain, and I realize something I should have figured out long ago. “You never wrote *Pushed Too Far* because you felt a calling to write. Or even because you wanted to be famous. I would have understood either of those motives. But it’s always been about crushing Xavian, about getting revenge. Why? You’re the one who betrayed him, and all to prove that Hadley wasn’t the right woman?”

“You don’t understand.”

I do—more than ever. “That’s what’s wrong with you, your compulsive need to be right. To win every argument. Why can’t you just let people make their own mistakes and learn for themselves?”

“That’s ridiculous when I can save them,” my brother yells, turning red in the face.

“Because no one asked you to. I know Xavian never would.”

“Nope,” he confirms.

Parker snarls his way. “You would have married that slut, and she would have taken every dime you had and messed you up for good.”

“She did anyway,” Xavian points out. “And you helped her.”

My brother rears back. “That’s not true. I tried to save you. I tried to be a friend.”

Xavian shakes his head. “Is that what you call fucking my fiancée?”

“You don’t understand!”

“I probably never will.”

“I thought of you like a brother,” Parker rails as if that should explain everything.

Xavian freezes, then looks my way. “If that’s how you treat a sibling, then I understand Corinne coming to me.”

“You’re *not* marrying her.”

Is my brother serious? “That’s *my* decision. Not yours.”

He turns softer eyes on me. “Ninny, you don’t—”

“Understand? I do. You keep calling me Ninny like I’m still four. You refused to give me my inheritance to grow the business I built from the ground up because you want me to take the ‘right’ path. *Your* path. Why can’t you just accept that I’m choosing my own path—my job, my husband, my life?”

His expression turns pleading. “Before Mom and Dad left on that fateful trip, Dad told me I was in charge and to take care of you. I promised him I would. I swore I wouldn’t let him down. I’ve always tried to keep that promise.”

Vaguely, I remember that conversation as he ruffled my brother’s hair and smiled. Dad always called Parker his little man. He tried to show us kids how to be good to each other and to do right. I know our parents’ deaths hit Parker really hard.

I soften. “I know. But you can let go now. I’m okay.” I look at Xavian and take his hand. “I’m going to be great.”

Parker takes in my affectionate gesture and glares. “What will it take for you to walk away from him? You want your inheritance now? I’ll sign the papers tomorrow if you promise never to see Xavian again.”

I suck in a shocked breath. His offer comes out of left field. But when I see Riley blanch, I realize it shouldn’t. Parker’s thrown around money before to make me fall in line. I’d bet everything on that.

“You motherfucker. You’re going to bribe her?” Xavian growls, then gestures to Riley. “Like you bribed that asshole?”

My brother’s sanctimonious stare and my ex-boyfriend’s wince tells me he’s right and they’re both guilty as hell. Suddenly, I understand everything. After all, if my brother would screw up a friendship and forge a very public career to prove his point with a pal, what would he do to “save” his sister?

I whirl on Riley. “Did he pay you to come back here and romance me?”

My ex swallows and shifts his gaze to my brother. “I-I... wanted to come back. I never wanted to end things with you in the first place. I’ve always cared about you.”

But he doesn’t deny my accusation. In fact, he makes the situation even clearer. “Hold on. You not only took my brother’s money to romance me away from Xavian...but he paid you not to propose last year?”

His face is full of apology. “How did you find out I planned to propose?”

“It doesn’t matter how I found out,” I insist. “You cared enough to buy me a ring but not enough to say no to my brother’s bribe.”

His face falls. “I started out with good intentions. I called Parker to see if we could start over, be amicable. I asked him for your hand. He knew I was broke and drowning in student debt. I couldn’t live on what I was making in New York, but I didn’t want to go back home and admit to my parents that I’d been a failure, so—”

“You bartered me for money. I guess you figured I was replaceable.” I laugh bitterly. “All those months of thinking *I* was the problem. And all those wasted tears... But you never really cared.”

“I did. I was in love with you! Leaving you killed me. But your brother promised I’d be debt free and that you’d be happy... I still think about you all the time. I haven’t slept with anyone since we split.”

“No shock there,” Xavian drawls.

He’s absolutely incorrigible. I elbow his ribs. “Behave.”

Xavian sighs like I’m asking for the moon.

“I think that’s enough,” Parker says. “He’s confessed to everything, and you’ve humiliated him—”

“I’ll deal with you in a minute,” I snarl at my brother, wagging my finger at him. “Right now, I don’t want to hear it.”

He looks stunned. “You’ve never talked to me like that.”

“And that was my mistake. I won’t be repeating it.”

“This is *his* influence.” Parker points accusingly at Xavian.

“No, this is *your* doing. You’ve reaped what you’ve sown.” I turn back to Riley. “You wouldn’t be here if Parker hadn’t paid you to come after me, would you?”

Riley shifts uncomfortably from one foot to the other, then cuts a stare at my brother. Asking his permission to tell the truth?

“Look at me,” I demand. “He didn’t ask you a question. *I* did. I want an answer. I *deserve* an answer.”

“No. Under our previous agreement, I’m not even allowed to speak to you.” Riley looks down like he’s ashamed.

As he should be. I’m angry and I’m too betrayed to feel sorry for him. “So you would never have come back?”

He winces. “I have another decade left on my student loans.”

In other words, no. Whatever his feelings, he never loved me enough to choose me.

“And the ‘loan’ you were going to give me...was my brother’s money?”

“Yes.” Riley barely manages to get the word out.

The difference between him and Xavian couldn’t be clearer. Riley threw me under the bus to line his own pockets, regardless of how I felt or what I wanted. If I’d been the gullible child Parker accused me of being and blindly married Riley, he would have been a serviceable spouse. He would have kept a respectable job and probably been a faithful husband and a dependable father. But our entire marriage would have been built on a bed of lies.

Xavian, on the other hand, gave up his future—his dream—for me. Because he wants me to succeed. Because he believes in me. Because he loves me. Because he would do anything for me.

I finally believe that.

He’s the sort of man I deserve to spend my life with, someone I can trust with my whole heart.

I turn to Riley. “Pack your bags and get out.”

He doesn’t even argue. He merely nods, tosses all his crap into his suitcase, empties his shampoo and shaving cream from

the bathroom, then slinks for the door. “I’m sorry, Corinne.”

“I can see that.” But it’s too little too late. “Let me give you some advice. If you don’t want to spend the rest of your life alone, learn how not to be a selfish douchebag. Figure out how to put someone else first.” I point Xavian’s way. “Learn how to be more like this man.”

As Riley slinks out the door, Xavian slides his arm around me and smiles. “Can I put that ring on your finger now?”

“He’s bamboozling you. He’s leading you astray!” my brother insists.

I roll my eyes. “He’s not. Just stop.”

My brother turns to him. “I’ll tell the world you’re not Xayden Coast if you walk away from her tonight and never look back.”

What the hell? I gape at my brother, who’s obviously serious. And it pisses me off so much. But what about Xavian? Is he even remotely tempted?

“Fuck you. I don’t care what you tell the world anymore,” he assures Parker. “I don’t care what they think. But if you keep this shit up, the truth will eventually come out. It always does. Then...it will be on you. And it won’t be pretty.”

I turn to Xavian with the biggest smile. He could have responded to my brother’s PR kickback ploy by taking the deal. Or even threatening to release that video from our engagement party. But he chose me and protected me again.

He always will.

“You’re an asshole,” my brother hurls. “I’m going to—”

“Do what?” I give Parker the full force of my anger. “Stop meddling in my life!”

“I’m only trying to help.”

“Don’t.” I could threaten to turn Xavian loose on my brother. While he probably craves—and deserves—the vengeance, he’d rather have me. “I don’t need it. And I won’t want it ever again.”

My brother gapes. “You’re serious?”

I nod. “Think hard. Think about everything you’ve done in the name of ‘helping’ the people you love over the years and how that’s worked out.”

Beside me, Xavian approaches Parker. It’s probably the closest they’ve been to each other in half a decade. Xavian has every right to punch my brother in the face. He probably has the itch, too. Instead, he claps Parker on the shoulder. “Listen, I’m going to do whatever I have to in order to persuade your sister to marry me. Because I love her. You’re worried I’m a manwhore? Not anymore. She’s it for me. You’re worried my family isn’t good enough? The Reeds are gold, and if you spent time with them, you’d know that. You’re worried you’ll no longer have any sway over your sister? You shouldn’t. She’s a fucking adult. She’s smart, savvy, and ambitious. You did a good job raising her. Let go.”

Parker frowns like Xavian’s speech is painful. “But I…”

My brother is struggling to accept all this. I try to find the words to bring him around. Despite his faults, I’d rather have Parker in my life than not.

But Xavian helps me out again. “So what happens next can go one of two ways, and this totally depends on you. If she marries me, we’re always going to have Corinne in common. She’ll always be your sister, and she’ll always be my wife. We can either be civil or we can be enemies. I’m willing to bury the hatchet and drop the animosity. I’m also willing to keep fucking fighting until one of us destroys the other. It’s your choice.”

My brother doesn’t say anything for a long minute. He stares at Xavian, seeming to test his sincerity, but his steely resolve speaks for itself. Finally, he turns to me. “Do you really want to marry him? The bastard son of a criminal who’s probably fucked a thousand women?”

“It’s none of your concern. From now on, I’ll be making my own decisions.” When Parker sighs, shaking his head, I take his hand. “You either love me or you don’t. If you don’t, let’s part ways here. If you do…then I’m asking you, as the

only blood family I have left, to let me live my life as I choose.”

Xavian drops a kiss on the top of my head. “I’m so proud of you, princess. You said that perfectly.” Then he looks at my brother. “What do you say?”

“You really love her? Until death do you part?”

Xavian doesn’t hesitate. “I really do.”

Parker presses his lips together, his expression telling me it’s a lot to accept. Then he exhales. “I’ll try. I’ll really try.” He squeezes my hand. “I don’t want to lose you. And I...didn’t realize how much you’d grown up.”

In some ways, I hadn’t until Xavian challenged me. Until he proved to me I was good enough. Until he loved me.

I step forward and wrap my arms around my brother. I’ll do my best to forgive him. It will take time. All I can do is hope that he lives up to his end of the bargain. “Thank you.”

He envelops me in a tight hug. “I only wanted to see you happy.”

I step back with a nod. “I know. But that’s up to me. I’ll call you later.”

“All right. I’m going back to LA tomorrow.”

It’s for the best. “Hopefully, I’ll see you for the holidays.”

That gives us a few months to settle into the new norm of this relationship. I pray that’s enough.

Parker hesitates, then nods. “That would be nice.”

I send him one last smile as I grab my suitcase and exit the hotel room.

Behind me, I hear Xavian stop in front of my brother. “Take care.”

Over and over, he just keeps proving he’s the bigger man. I admire the heck out of him for it.

In the hallway, he takes my hand and leads me to his car. “Do you want to talk about this now or...”

“Not until we’re alone.” I want to get as far away from this place and this confrontation with my brother as possible.

“Whatever you want, princess.”

The twenty-minute drive back to Xavian’s house is silent. We’re both lost in our own thoughts. The moon hangs high in the sky and the Hawaiian breeze whips through the car. Katy Perry softly sings “Roar” on the radio because the volume is turned way down. It’s the perfect song after tangling with my brother. Who knows what will happen next? All I can do is be optimistic and look forward to the future I determine.

Clearly, I have a big decision in front of me.

Xavian hops out of the car and comes around to offer me his hand. Neither of us addresses my suitcase. Like, now that the moment is here, he’s afraid to ask whether I’m staying or I want to be alone—maybe for good.

Inside his place, he drops his keys on the wide kitchen island and flips on the light. “We’re alone. Do you have an answer for me?”

He’s nervous. It shows. And it tells me that whatever I say next is deeply important to him. It’s everything.

I take him by the hand and tug him down the hall, to the darkened bedroom where we first made love. Slowly, I shed my clothes until I’m completely naked before him.

His eyes flare with hunger, sucking me in with his hot stare. But he doesn’t move. “Corinne?”

“I want you inside me.”

Xavian swallows and hesitates half a second, then peels off every stitch. By the time he’s done, I’m already lying across the bed, watching him walk toward me, erect and full of determination. He pauses to grab a condom from the nightstand.

“Don’t.”

He sends me a sharp glance, scans my face, then slowly sets the foil packet back in the drawer. “Princess?”

“Hurry. Please.”

“You want me bareback? You want to live dangerously?”

In answer, I spread my legs.

Xavian doesn't waste another second before he settles between my thighs, spreads kisses across my neck, and works himself into me until I gasp with the familiar tingling fullness I can't get enough of. From this man I can't get enough of. I rock, willing him to stroke me deep. I need to feel him everywhere—skin to skin, lips on lips, heart to heart.

He refuses to move. “Yes or no? Will you marry me?”

I meet his gaze and smile, showing him all the happiness he's given me and all the dazzling joy I'll spend every day trying to give back. “I love you. And I'm choosing you for you. Yes!”

A reckless grin breaks out across his face as he holds my face, his expression so naked with love. “Say it again. Yes?”

“Yes. A thousand times yes! I'm so lucky to have you. I'll be the best wife. And I'll love you always.”

“I'll always love you, too.” He unfurls his fist, grabs my hand, and slides the ring on my finger. “Now you're mine. I'll never leave you.”

“And you're mine. Don't forget it.”

“Never,” he groans, driving into me slowly, with purpose. “If we keep this up, you're going to show me you'll be the best mother way sooner than expected.”

“Nothing would make me happier.”

“Oh, fuck. I'd love you to be pregnant. I've fantasized about it. We need to get married quick,” he murmurs against my neck as he holds my hips to the mattress and slides in so deep I swear he fills my whole body.

“Yes. It will take a few months to plan a wedding, but—”

“Fuck that.” He surges inside me again, so insistently a moan escapes me and pleasure starts to take over. “The Reed women are known for organizing last-minute nuptials. All my

siblings have been married on Maxon and Keeley's lawn. What do you say?"

A wedding in paradise with the people who will soon be my extended family, joining my life with the man I love more than I ever dared to imagine? Hopefully my brother will come around, but if he doesn't, I've found myself, my peace, and my forever. "That sounds perfect. We should call them."

"After I'm done making you feel like *my* queen, princess." Xavian slants his mouth over mine and seals our commitment with a kiss. "We will."

epilogue

Six weeks later

Sunshine Coast Bed-and Breakfast, Maui

Corinne

The sun shines bright in the clear October sky.

Today, the incredible is happening. I'm marrying Xavian Costa—my first crush, my first love, my king who, despite customary wedding tradition, made me feel like his queen again as the sun rose on our wedding day.

It's probably silly and sappy, since we're only on opposite sides of Maxon and Keeley's place getting ready for the ceremony, but I miss him.

"Suck it in, sister," Harlow says, tugging on the corset strings at the back of my chiffon wedding dress.

I feel like Scarlet O'Hara, clinging to the bedpost as Harlow gives the laces another pull. "I have to breathe."

"You said you wanted to look good for your pictures."

"I also don't want to faint," I grumble.

She laughs as she shows mercy and ties off the laces. "What else do you need?"

Mentally, I sift through my pre-ceremony list. "Bouquet, lipstick...and something to calm my stomach."

"You're nervous?"

No, but Xavian and I are saving our good news—that the two of us will become three in June—for the reception. I'm less than a month pregnant. We only found out two days ago. Not telling our friends and family has killed us for the last forty-eight hours. I'll be glad not to hold it in anymore. We're so ecstatic, and we want to share our joy with everyone.

“Isn’t that normal?” I ask to sidestep the truth.

Harlow shrugs. “I was queasy on my wedding day because I was already pregnant. But I know where Keeley keeps the crackers. Be right back,” my soon-to-be sister-in-law and now good friend says before she dashes out the door, the skirt of her earthy pink bridesmaid dress swishing in her wake.

“We got you, girl.” My best friend, Ashlee, sets the tube of lipstick Masey insisted would look great with my coloring on the nearby counter. The shade definitely has an appropriate name: Rosy Paradise. “It’s there when you’re ready.”

“Thanks.” I smile her way. “I’m so glad you could be here.”

“Are you kidding?” She takes my hands, her blond hair in a sedate up-do that’s nothing like her personality. “I wasn’t going to miss your wedding and being your maid of honor for anything. I fucking love you.”

I laugh. “I effing love you, too.”

She snorts. “Still can’t say the F-word?”

“I can. I have. I’ve said it to Xavian. He’ll vouch for me.”

“Even if you hadn’t, he’d lie through his teeth,” she points out. “That man *loves* you. I think he’s convinced you have the most magical pussy on the planet.”

“I think you’re right.” I grin.

He certainly can’t stay away from it. Not that I want him to.

“I want your secret. Kegels? Lube? Brazilian wax? Or something kinkier?” She eyes me. “Maybe you swing from the chandeliers? It’s always the quiet ones...”

I dissolve into giggles. “You’re crazy.”

“You know it.” She winks. “But I’m so damn happy for you, Nin. And, I’m not gonna lie, a little jealous. I want to stumble into my wedding prep like you, forty-five minutes late, looking freshly fucked and smiling from ear to ear. That sounds like heaven. Not the marriage part.” She shudders.

“You know commitment isn’t for me. But the orgasmic wake-up call? Yes, please. I’d love that, especially since I’m in the middle of a sex drought that makes the Sahara look like a fucking ocean.”

“What happened to what’s-his-name?”

“Neil.” Ash rolls her eyes. “He’s so last month. And so boring in bed. Hell, I’ve seen toothpicks better equipped to do the job.”

That’s my bestie, never shy with her opinion. “Maybe you’ll meet Mr. Right while you’re on the island.”

“I’d settle for Mr. Hung. Does Xavian have any hot friends?”

“Not that I noticed. But hey, Riley is still single,” I tease.

“Oh, hell no. I could never stand that cock bag.”

Thankfully, my ex left Maui the morning after he confessed to colluding with my brother for cash. Good riddance. I can’t believe I ever saw anything in that self-centered troll. I can’t believe I ever thought I was in love with him.

Thankfully, Xavian agreed to be my fake fiancé. I’m fortunate he made me realize I was settling, and blessed that he asked me to marry him for real. Our last couple of months together have been idyllic. I’m so ready to call him my husband.

Echo bustles closer, long hair in some elaborate twists that furl up into a bun. Her pregnancy doesn’t show yet, but her bridesmaid dress is a bit tighter than at our last fitting. Still, she looks amazing as she hands me my bouquet. “Five minutes. You okay?”

I swallow and feel my unsettled stomach pitch. “Trying.”

She sends me a sympathetic glance and races to turn on a nearby fan. “I know, honey. Nerves had me in knots on my wedding day.”

Harlow returns with crackers, Keeley in tow, who’s carrying a lemon-lime soda. “Try these.”

“Thank you both.” Gratefully, I eat a saltine and sip the bubbly drink.

“Better?” Harlow asks.

“Much.” I imbibe more of the soda.

“You sure?” Keeley says. “You still look peaked.”

“I’ll be fine.” Now that morning sickness is subsiding and the ceremony is about to start, I really am feeling better.

A knock sounds. Harlow opens the door to admit Maxon, whose gaze lands on me. “You look beautiful.”

I smile. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Let’s hope Xavian makes it through the ceremony without dragging you off to a dark corner to have his wicked way with you.”

“I’m sure he can manage twenty minutes without me.”

“The way he’s wearing a threadbare path in the carpet with his pacing?” Maxon raises a brow. “I’m not.”

Another knock sounds, then Griff’s pretty blond wife, Britta, pokes her head in. “Time for everyone to get in their places. Ready, doll?”

“Beyond.” I smile back at her.

After a quick kiss on my cheek, Keeley rushes for the door. “It’s going to be perfect. Deep breaths. You’re marrying the right man.”

“I know.” I’m convinced of that from my head all the way down to my toes.

Ashlee passes me the lipstick, which I quickly refresh. Echo fluffs the tulle of my veil while Harlow helps me with the soft train of my dress. Then I turn to leave the room, taking my final steps as a single woman.

When I return to this room, I’ll be Xavian’s wife.

Together, we line up at the back of the house for the walk across the lawn and to the private beach, where the white arch laced with plumeria and baby white roses stands against the

backdrop of the gentle blue ocean. In front of it, Xavian stands, Hayes by his side, along with their buddy Graham. The spot to Graham's left is empty, just waiting for Maxon.

Gracefully, Echo walks up the aisle toward the rest of the wedding party to the slow strains of an instrumental ballad. Harlow follows with the jaunty step of a woman who's both incredibly comfortable in her skin and happy. Then Ashlee makes her way down the soft runner, looking stunning in her strapless dress.

It really is a shame she can't find a guy she loves, one who would change her mind about marriage. She's too sweet, funny, and loyal to spend her life alone.

"Our turn," Maxon says beside me, holding out his elbow. "Let's make you an official part of the family."

I wrap my fingers around his arm. "Thank you so much for welcoming me with open arms."

He smiles. "I can't imagine the Reed clan without you anymore."

Since my parents are gone and things with my brother are still on the mend, I'd asked Maxon if he would give me away. He said he'd be honored. It was so kind of him to agree to be both Xavian's groomsman and play the traditional father-of-the-bride role. Still, I'd hoped Parker would come around. I should have known better. My brother almost never admits he's wrong.

I tear up as I wait for the song to end and mine to begin, so I can walk down the aisle, the way we rehearsed last night.

"Ninny?" an all-too-familiar voice murmurs behind me.

I spin to see my brother coming through the back door, heading directly toward Maxon and me. "Parker?"

Beside me, Maxon stiffens.

My brother glances his way with an apologetic glance, then he focuses on me. "Can I talk to you?"

"Now?" I have maybe thirty seconds before my music starts. "If you've come to persuade me not to marry Xavian—"

“Nothing like that. I’ve watched the two of you since I arrived on Thursday. After a couple of restless nights, I did a lot of thinking. I know you love him.”

“More than you understand.”

“I know. And last time I saw you, he told me he loved you. I didn’t quite believe him. But everything I’ve seen in the last two days tells me his feelings for you are real.” Parker sighs. “He’s not the same man he was in college. And I acknowledge that we both played a role in the awful things that happened all those years ago.”

My heart stops. It’s not exactly an admission of guilt, but for my brother, that’s very close. “What are you saying?”

He swallows. “I tried to be protective and I clearly went overboard. I meant well...and I’m sorry. I hope you both can forgive me someday.”

I want to. This would be the perfect day to do it, but I can’t sweep everything that happened under the rug. “You did a lot of damage to my husband-to-be’s reputation. He almost lost out on two vital business opportunities that would have cost him millions.”

Parker has the good grace to look chastened. “I heard he gave you nearly every dime he’d saved to expand your business instead.”

“He offered it to me, yes. Ultimately, I gave it back to him.”

Once I moved into Xavian’s Maui home, I no longer had any need to buy a new house of my own. Between the money I banked from the influx of orders and giving up my expensive rental in LA, I had enough money to expand. Besides, it meant more to me that his dream of going into business with his family comes to fruition. Finally, it is. The day we return from our honeymoon, he’ll be announced as Bethany and Clint’s full partner *and* he, Maxon, and Griff will put out a statement announcing their new Pacific-based property venture. Everyone is over the moon, especially me.

My brother nods as I hear the last of the music signifying the end of the bridesmaids' processional ending.

"We'll have to talk about the rest of this later."

"I want to walk you down the aisle," he blurts.

Multiple thoughts pelt me at once. Why did Parker wait until the last minute to ask? Why does it suddenly matter to him? Why should I let him after all he's put me through?

"Corinne?" Maxon asks beside me. I don't see a shred of judgment on his face, probably because I know this man—like all the Reeds—has learned the value of family the hard way.

Maybe my brother has finally learned that lesson, too. It doesn't really matter that he waited or that the timing is inconvenient. What matters is that he's willing to accept part of the blame, along with my decision to marry Xavian. The past is in the past, and the future will be brighter if we all find ways to forgive and move on. Yes, I'm always the peacemaker, but I'm convinced we've come to the point in our lives where fighting, accusations, mudslinging, and vengeance serve no one.

I turn to Maxon. "Would you be okay?"

"If you cut my wedding duties in half?" He smiles. "Yeah. Your fiancé and the rest of the family just want you to be happy. If your brother is willing to walk you down the aisle and that's what you want, go for it."

The opening strains of "I Could Not Ask For More" begin. That's my cue. I only have a split-second to decide. But is there really any choice?

"I will. Thank you. My brother can take it from here."

"It seems fitting." Maxon cups my shoulder softly, then nods Parker's way before jogging to join the other groomsmen.

My brother offers me his elbow. "Thank you for being the bigger person and accepting me back."

"You're welcome. You won't disappoint me again? You know I'm an adult who will make her own decisions?" I

phrase that as a question, but it's really not. Xavian has rubbed off on me, and I'm much better about setting expectations up front now. It's served me well in business, which is still growing by leaps and bounds.

"I do." He smiles ironically. "Now let's get you down the aisle so you can say those words to Xavian."

I wrap my fingers around his biceps. "I'm ready."

As Keeley begins to sing the heartfelt ballad first crooned by Edwin McCain, we begin our march toward the altar and my groom. Everyone stands. My queasiness returns and my knees start knocking. What if Xavian objects to this new development? What if he and my brother exchange words? Or punches?

But I shouldn't have doubted the man I love. He looks confused at first, but when he sees me staring back with unabashed love and happiness while Parker guides me toward him with a beaming smile, he smooths his furrowed brow and feasts his eyes on me.

When we reach the end of the aisle, Xavian steps up. His eyes glitter with excitement. His face is full of love. I tear up again.

"You look beautiful," my groom whispers for my ears alone.

I smile and sniffle. This really is the happiest day of my life.

Then Xavian meets my brother's stare. They exchange a glance. Understanding passes between them. Will they ever be close friends again? I doubt it. Parker torched that bridge in a fit of immaturity and self-righteousness. But in that moment, I know they'll be tolerant and civil. For me. Because each wants what brings me peace and joy, and they both know that's harmony.

As the music fades, the officiant, a large man with a dark beard and a loud Hawaiian shirt who introduced himself yesterday as Lono, welcomes everyone to the ceremony and thanks them for bearing witness to this affirmation of our love

and the joining of our lives. Then he recites some beautiful thoughts about marriage that move me. I'm still clutching my brother's arm, but I want to touch Xavian so badly, to share this profound moment with him. He turns his gaze to me. The matching emotion on his bold, masculine face seizes my heart.

Finally, Lono smiles Parker's way. "Do you give your blessing to this couple and support their union?"

My brother clears his throat. "I do."

Once more, I tear up. I'm barely able to hold back as he faces me and lifts my veil, then kisses my cheek. "Be happy, Ninny."

I'm so choked up, I can barely speak. "I will."

"I know." He puts my hand into Xavian's, then nods my groom's way. "Take care of her."

"Always."

As my brother retreats to sit in the front row, the man I'm minutes away from calling my husband squeezes my hand. Excitement leaps.

Together, we face Lono, who addresses us about the joys and responsibility of marriage, along with the sanctity of the promises we're about to make. Our vows fly by in a blur, Xavian reciting his in a strong, sure voice that makes my heart flutter. I eke out the most important words of my life in between tears, which my beloved groom gently thumbs away. Then he's sliding a band on my finger, beside the giant rock he gave me when he agreed to be my fake fiancé. I settle his ring in place, on his left hand, closest to his heart. Finally, we're kissing, my heart racing, our lips clinging, our love flowing. In every thought and word, I feel my husband's passion and devotion. I'm humbled—and blessed.

"For the first time, I give to you Xavian and Corinne Costa, everyone. Congratulations!"

The man I'm now married to turns to me with a blinding smile that sears itself in my brain. I'm overjoyed, my lips curling, my tears flowing. He presses his lips to mine again in both reassurance and promise before we dash back down the

aisle, hand in hand, heading toward the small reception on Maxon and Keeley's lanai.

In a row of chairs about halfway back, I spot Arthur Belmont, the elderly man Xavian and I helped the day I arrived in Hawaii. He's gripping his wife's hand and grinning.

I don't know exactly how Xavian found him or how he persuaded the couple to come, but I pause to press a kiss to his cheek, then take his wife's hand. "Thank you for coming."

"Are you kidding? We wouldn't have missed this for the world. I had a feeling about you two."

As Xavian laughs beside me, my smile widens. "So did I."

Admittedly, I was afraid at first. So afraid. My attraction to Xavian was unlike anything I'd ever known. More than once, sanity told me it would be so much easier to run. Something just wouldn't let me. At the time, I wasn't sure what. Now I'm pretty sure that something was my heart.

We've finally come full circle, and as we race toward our reception, the announcement of our precious forthcoming bundle planned, I'm convinced life is now perfect.

"Happy, Mrs. Costa?" My husband asks once we're alone.

"Beyond." I snifle again. "Even if my makeup is a mess, I don't care. How can I ever give you back the joy you've given me?"

He caresses my face, then drops his hand to my belly. "You already have. Just keep giving me your love—"

"Always."

"That's all I'll ever need, princess."



I pursued her for a distraction. I'm capturing her so I can make her mine forever.

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If you're new to the Reed Family Reckoning world, welcome! You've read a little about a lot of characters. Below is a guide in case you'd like to read more about those you may have missed in other books:

-

Reed Family Reckoning: Siblings (complete)

More Than Want You (Book 1)

Maxon Reed & Keeley Kent

I hired her to distract my enemy. Now I'm determined to have her for my own.

More Than Need You (Book 2)

Griffin Reed & Britta Stone

I discovered my ex's secret. Now I'll do anything to win her back.

More Than Love You (Book 3)

Noah Weston & Harlow Reed

I'm a high-profile athlete who needs a temporary girlfriend. Now I'll do anything to claim her forever.

Reed Family Reckoning: Bastards

More Than Crave You (Book 4)

Evan Cook & Nia Wright

I need to hire a wife. But I only want my assistant.

More Than Tempt You (Book 5)

Clint Holmes & Bethany Banks

I romanced her for revenge...but what if she's not the enemy after all?

Reed Family Reckoning: Friends

More Than Dare You (Book 6)

Trace Weston & Masey Garrett

I dared her to spend a hot, no-strings night with me. Now I'm determined to keep her forever.

More Than Hate You (Book 7)

Sebastian Shaw & Sloan O'Neill

I seduced my rival for a deal. Now I'll do anything to claim her for good.

Reed Family Reckoning: Novellas

More Than Pleasure You

Skye Ingram & Stephen Lund

Can I convince her our hot but temporary engagement should last forever?

More Than Protect You

Amanda Lund & Tanner Kirk

Can I keep the gorgeous, gun-shy single mother safe—and prove I'm the man for her?

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Can I persuade my innocent best friend that I should be her first?

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Shayla

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The good girl wants a favor? She'll pay in his bed.

Pierce “One-Mile” Walker has always kept his heart under wraps and his head behind his sniper’s scope. Nothing about buttoned-up Brea Bell should appeal to him. But after a single glance at the pretty preacher’s daughter, he doesn’t care that his past is less than shiny, that he gets paid to end lives...or that she’s his teammate’s woman. He’ll do whatever it takes to steal her heart.

Brea has always been a dutiful daughter and a good girl... until she meets the dangerous warrior. He’s everything she shouldn’t want, especially after her best friend introduces her to his fellow operative as his girlfriend—to protect her from Pierce. But he’s a forbidden temptation she’s finding impossible to resist.

Then fate strikes, forcing Brea to beg Pierce to help solve a crisis. But his skills come at a price. When her innocent flirtations run headlong into his obsession, they cross the line into a passion so fiery she can’t say no. Soon, his past rears its head and a vendetta calls his name in a mission gone horribly wrong. Will he survive to fight his way back to the woman who claimed his soul?



EXCERPT

Finally, he had her cornered. He intended to tear down every last damn obstacle between him and Brea Bell.

Right now.

For months, she'd succumbed to fears, buried her head in the sand, even lied. He'd tried to be understanding and patient. He'd put her first, backed away, given her space, been the good guy.

Fuck that. Today, she would see the real him.

One-Mile Walker slammed the door of his truck and turned all his focus on the modest white cottage with its vintage blue door. As he marched up the long concrete driveway, his heart pounded. He had a nasty idea how Brea's father would respond when he explained why he'd come. The man would slam the door in his face; no maybe about that. After all, he was the bad boy from a broken home who had defiled Reverend Bell's perfect daughter with unholy glee.

But One-Mile refused to let Brea go again. He'd make her father listen...somehow. Since punching the guy in the face was out of the question, he'd have to quell his brute-force instinct to fight dirty and instead employ polish, tact, and charm—all the qualities he possessed zero of.

Fuck. This was going to be a shit show.

Still, One-Mile refused to give up. He'd known uphill battles his whole life. What was one more?

Through the front window, he spotted the soft doe eyes that had haunted him since last summer. Though Brea was talking to an elderly couple, the moment she saw him approach her porch, her amber eyes went wide with shock.

Determination gripped One-Mile and squeezed his chest. By damned, she was going to listen, too.

He wasn't leaving without making her his.

As he mounted the first step toward her door, his cell phone rang. He would have ignored it if it hadn't been for two critical facts: His job often entailed saving the world as people knew it, and this particular chime he only heard when one of

the men he respected most in this fucked-up world needed him during the grimmest of emergencies.

Of all the lousy timing...

He yanked the device from his pocket. “Walker here. Colonel?”

“Yeah.”

Colonel Caleb Edgington was a retired, highly decorated military officer and a tough son of a bitch. One thing he wasn’t prone to was drama, so that single foreboding syllable told One-Mile that whatever had prompted this call was dire.

He didn’t bother with small talk, even though it had been months since they’d spoken, and he wondered how the man was enjoying both his fifties and his new wife, but they’d catch up later. Now, they had no time to waste.

“What can I do for you?” Since he owed Caleb a million times over, whatever the man needed One-Mile would make happen.

Caleb’s sons might be his bosses these days...but as far as One-Mile was concerned, the jury was still out on that trio. Speaking of which, why wasn’t Caleb calling those badasses?

One-Mile could only think of one answer. It was hardly comforting.

“Or should I just ask who I need to kill?”

A feminine gasp sent his gaze jerking to Brea, who now stood in the doorway, her rosy bow of a mouth gaping open in a perfect little *O*. She’d heard that. *Goddamn it to hell*. Yeah, she knew perfectly well what he was. But he’d managed to shock her repeatedly over the last six months.

“I’m not sure yet.” Caleb sounded cautious in his ear. “I’m going to text you an address. Can you meet me there in fifteen minutes?”

For months, he’d been anticipating this exact moment with Brea. “Any chance it can wait an hour?”

“No. Every moment is critical.”

Since Caleb would never say such things lightly, One-Mile didn't see that he had an option. "On my way."

He ended the call and pocketed the phone as he climbed onto the porch and gave Brea his full attention. He had so little time with her, but he'd damn sure get his point across before he went.

She stepped outside and shut the door behind her, swallowing nervously as she cast a furtive glance over her shoulder, through the big picture window. Was she hoping her father didn't see them?

"Pierce." Her whisper sounded closer to a hiss. "What are you doing here?"

He hated when anyone else used his given name, but Brea could call him whatever the hell she wanted as long as she let him in her life.

He peered down at her, considering how to answer. He'd had grand plans to lay his cards out on the table and do whatever he had to—talk, coax, hustle, schmooze—until she and her father both came around to his way of thinking. Now he only had time to cut to the chase. "You know what I want, pretty girl. I'm here for you. And when I come back, I won't take no for an answer."

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EXCERPT – Seducing the Innocent

One of his warm hands leaves my breast and skates down my waist, settling over my hip to bring me closer. I can smell a hint of toothpaste and coffee on his breath.

“Have you let any of those tossers you’ve dated kiss you, Kayla?”

I swallow. What will he do if I tell him the truth? “A few.”

He scowls as if my answer pains him. “Did you like it?”

I wanted to, but... “It was all right. No one has blown my panties off.”

I suspect Oliver could.

His eyes soften. “Kissing can be wonderful. Someday, when you find a man you care about, one who knows what he’s doing, you’ll love it.”

I have a man I very much care about standing right in front of me, and the thought of kissing Oliver makes my body throb in arousal. I sway closer, pressing my aching breasts against his chest. “What about you? I’ll bet you know what you’re doing.”

The second the words leave my mouth, my heart careens out of control.

“I shouldn’t kiss you, Kayla,” Oliver practically groans.

“Please,” I beg. “Just once.” When he stares at my lips, they tingle. Everything in my body flushes hot. Even my skin feels too tight. And the ache between my legs coils relentlessly. “You’ve already touched my breasts.”

“Are you bloody trying to kill me?” His voice sounds rough with need.

That excites me even more.

“Is one kiss asking so much?” I clasp his T-shirt in my fists and tilt my face under his.

He hesitates for a long moment, his eyes searching mine, nostrils flaring, jaw rigid.

“Kayla,” he growls. “Goddamn it...”

Just when I’m sure he’s going to walk away, Oliver grabs me by the nape, holding me immobile. His breathing turns hard and rough. I tremble. He’s wrestling with himself. My heart revs. What is he thinking? Is there any chance he’ll kiss me?

Suddenly, he jerks me against his body and seizes my lips...

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ABOUT SHAYLA BLACK

LET'S GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER!

Shayla Black is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of nearly ninety contemporary, erotic, paranormal, and historical romances. Her books have sold millions of copies and been published in a dozen languages.

As an only child, Shayla occupied herself by daydreaming, much to the chagrin of her teachers. In college, she found her love for reading and started pursuing a publishing career. Though she graduated with a degree in Marketing/Advertising and embarked on a stint in corporate America, her heart was with her stories and characters, so she left her pantyhose and power suits behind.

Shayla currently lives in North Texas with her wonderfully supportive husband, her daughter, and two spoiled tabbies. In her “free” time, she enjoys reality TV, gaming, and listening to an eclectic blend of music.

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